RICARDO G. CURCI

THE SPECTRES OF PROGRESS

For the Reiters:

Alois, Gerhard, Ian

Who likes a fable of sand,

a cavity in the water,

another desert.

A key at the bottom

of my pocket, meeting my fingers;

the circle with its biting snake...

RICARDO MOLINARI

THE BIRD

1

Joshua walked beneath the scaffolding of the dome, and the shadows and lights formed a striped path along which he let himself be guided, like every day of the week. He felt warmth when he passed through the fragment of light, which was not caused by the sun of other times, those he heard his father speak of, when the sky was clear and the sun was a sphere of enormous intensity that had already begun to damage humans with its ultraviolet rays. Now it was simply a slightly brighter light than the shadow cast by the buildings, filtered through the thick layer of eternal clouds that let down the constant acid rain. Against this rain, construction had begun on the dome, resembling the eyelids of an immense eye that was gradually closing over the city.

He had been working on its construction for three years, and today, like every morning since then, he left his apartment very early, before dawn, without even checking the weather or the city through the narrow window. The weather was always the same: humid, dark, sometimes torrid, and with a luminosity of vivid, ochre reflections that blurred his vision and made his eyes shine. He had a coffee before leaving, put on a coat over his work overalls, picked up his toolbox, and descended the crowded elevator. One

hundred and fifty floors below, the street was covered in damp, and the yellow municipal machines, resembling bulldozers with high arms and enormous, hideous heads rearing up, appeared to sweep away the remains of the acid rain, the bodies of those who had forgotten or disobeyed the curfew, both men and animals. The markets opened at that hour, and the transportation of men and women to the auctions of the large companies would begin two hours later. Joshua looked at all this as he did every morning, because he couldn't keep his gaze down, fixed as if his eyes were made of lead on the pavement. He looked at the entire spectrum of the city as he walked the short distance that separated him from the area to ascend to the dome, retaining the visions he collected each morning, to reproduce them later in his apartment at night. He would project them to remember them, as his father had taught him. He, like almost everyone in the city, was unable to speak. His true life was more internal than external; he was more of a receiver than a transmitter, at least as far as what is commonly called interpersonal communication was concerned. His father had read books; he owned none and couldn't distinguish one letter from another. His father had talked nonstop day and night, because the day would come, he told him many times, when they would deny him his voice. And that day finally arrived. The city's security agents had come looking for him. The dome was still just a project, but the foundations of the surrounding walls on which it would rest were already being excavated. They held him between two men, while a third applied an electric cattle prod to his throat. Joshua saw his father resist and scream, pressed against the wall, whimpering like a child, begging to at least allow him his voice. But the cattle prod entered his mouth and burned his tongue and vocal organs. He spent two weeks in bed, delirious, clutching his burned throat and the semblance of a tongue they had left behind.

Every morning, on his way to work, Joshua wondered what his father had been saying before all this. Why had they deprived him of his voice? So he tried to utter sounds, knowing that the roar of the machinery in the streets would prevent anyone from hearing him. All that came out of his throat was a noise like that of a dying bird, perhaps an aggressive bird that feels threatened. A guttural cry. Like every time he tried, his throat ached, and opening his mouth to soothe the irritation of his mucous membranes only succeeded in injecting the noxious substances from the acid rain that rose in the streets after falling and settling during the night. The water evaporated, and the gases rose to the tops of the buildings. When I stood at the top of the dome, I could see the toxic steam escaping from the areas that were not yet sealed, like chimney smoke merging with the gray clouds from which they had been born a few hours before. When the dome wasOnce it was finally finished, the city would be protected, and the few remaining gases would be eliminated by the purification system.

But all this was still under construction. And Joshua reached the ascent area, took his place in the large elevators, alongside his coworkers, and began the rapid ascent. The ascent was dizzying in the first few days for each new worker. There were no walls in the elevator, only safety restraints for each one. They could see, then, the tall buildings surrounding them, while the streets disappeared into the fog and smog, and the silence began

its comforting gift. Because up there, at the top of the dome, so close to heaven, the silence was so similar to the enforced silence of their silent voices, that it was as if heaven were the true home of each of them. Up there, where they had not yet arrived, the gloomy sky held the rudiments of the past. A mythical past, perhaps, because most of them could only imagine it, but the feeling of deja vu was inevitable. Something sparkled in their eyes at the sight of the cloudy sky, in contact with the sometimes strong, sometimes merciful wind that soothed the sweat on their skin beneath their work clothes. But above all, it was the silence they longed for when they returned home. Of course, they hadn't spoken about all this with their colleagues, but they could see it hundreds of times on their faces, when they descended at the end of each day over those three years of work.

They reached the summit and put on the magnetic boots that kept them fixed to the dome's surface. With helmets and boots on, thick gloves, and work tools hanging from their belts, each of them dispersed throughout the enormous structure formed by beams that formed immense arches resembling the ribs of ancient monsters, and between these arches were long bridges that shortened or dismantled as the roof closed in. He had heard the comparison from his father, when he told him that, as a child, he had had a book showing the skeletons of ancient prehistoric animals. Joshua hadn't understood then, nor does he fully understand it now, especially since he had no measurements to compare them with; all he had ever known was small city animals, rats or old, sick dogs. His father had touched his ribs and explained to him that if he imagined an animal as enormous as that entire city, he would know that its thorax would be as large as the arches of the future dome.

He had died before seeing the beginning of its construction. He had thrown himself from the one hundred and fiftieth floor of the building where they both lived. That night, his father had spoken in a language he no longer understood, a mixture of various dialects, almost like the feverish, incoherent verbiage of an epileptic. He had seen him, many nights before, make an incision in his right temple. From his bed, Joshua saw the trickle of blood contained by the small electrocoagulator as his father inserted the chip that a smuggler had brought that same afternoon. His father then looked at him from his own bed, the suture already made and a smile on his lips. He had heard him say something in the ancient language of saints, perhaps Latin, and then pronounce the words of old phrases that brought back memories of wars and catastrophes, of lost worlds where men and women sang long songs of epics, of love, and of beautiful worlds forever lost in the growing oblivion. Then he saw in his father who was truly his father, like an identification, an individuality that stood out from what now seemed like the faint outlines of the city. The city not as a construction, but as the system it was: customs, regulations, actions.

His father was thought. His father was knowledge. And in the smile on his lips, he read the sadness of abandonment, the inevitability of the helplessness of not being able to bear so much: the past was an affront that nonetheless saved him from present death. And at the end of the night, the old man, who wasn't so old because Joshua was barely a child, threw

himself out the narrow window amidst convulsions and silent screams he could no longer utter. But a minute earlier, the wind from the heights had been playing brutally with his long, graying hair as he sat astride the window frame, looking successively into the abyss and into the apartment, where his son watched him, silent, forever condemned to the irredeemable silence. Then he slumped back outside, while Joshua ceremoniously extended a small hand, only to stop as he realized the ridiculousness of his act. He lowered his hand, laid it on the bed, and touched his eyes, where the scars had already begun to close. The small projection machines wereinside, thanks to his father.

He stared down at the city from the high peak of the growing dome. For a moment, he thought he dominated the rest of the inhabitants, their buildings, their vehicles, all the trivial and sad everyday life amidst the smog that barely allowed a glimpse of faint rays of light magnified by the lenses installed on the inside of the completed sections of the construction. Many of these solar filters had already been installed on the large metal arches, but the new purifiers were not yet working. For that, the dome needed to be finished, and to definitively separate the city from the rest of the world, that world Joshua could now barely see through the dark clouds of pestilent gases that contaminated everything he knew. It was true, however, that he knew little of that so-called world. Only his father's stories had told him about it, because nothing referred to what surrounded the city, much less what lay beyond it. The city had no past, no relationships outside its surroundings. At least that's how he understood it.

However, the old man had told him about the cycles of food, about agriculture, about livestock, about industries, about factories, about the routes that transported food from its places of production. And when Joshua stood on the dome, he imagined, among the gray mists of the horizon, those cultivated fields, the grazing animals, the outlines of the factory buildings, the routes that sailed the earth as if over seas, circumnavigating until they enclosed the great lands of which man had become king and lord.

Unfortunately, he wasn't allowed much time for such reveries. Although there were no foremen or bosses watching over them, Joshua and his coworkers assigned to such heights were considered the most highly specialized in their technique, and therefore wore tracking chips in their magnetic boots. When for any reason they stopped their work, an alarm sounded. This was what happened this time. The alarm went off in his boots, once, twice, and the contemplation of the sky had to be suspended in his mind, as he returned to work. He bent over the surface of the dome, opened his toolboxes, and began the task. Nuts and bolts, rivets, old and irreplaceable instruments that had lasted through the centuries despite the unstoppable advance of new technologies. But what had become of that technology his father had spoken so much about? He hadn't seen much of the things the old man had mentioned: computers, robots, humanoids. All that remained were cities sunk in toxic gases or subjected to endless rains of acid. He would have asked him, had he been able to speak, and so in his father's every word he hoped to find a hint of what had ended that entire world of the past.

The surface of the dome was covered with new alloys brought from the factories within the city. There were workers like him there, working twelve-hour shifts every day, enclosed in those windowless buildings, sealed off from the damage of rain, with air so purified that the men were not allowed to leave their workplaces to rest. They slept in rooms prepared for them, and their families, if they had any, visited them once a week. Those alloys were extremely important to the future of the city, and they had to be manufactured with meticulous care and dedication. No foreign chemical element was allowed to enter their foundry, and therefore, at every entrance and exit from the large internal halls, the workers' naked bodies were subjected to long sterilization baths. Those who hadn't had children before starting work there would no longer have them. And he had seen many leave the foundries forever in a state of health that was little different from decrepitude and asthenia. So, even when there was no sun to contemplate, and every day of his life he was forced to soak himself in acid rain, to breathe the miasma of toxic gases that penetrated through the filtering masks, being up there, almost alone, isolated, gave him the opportunity to think, to remember his father's long stories. Sometimes he tried to imitate his father's voice, and his throat emitted guttural sounds that his tongue wouldn't obey. How was it, he wondered, that men had known how to speak so well, and what the real meaning of that communication was. At first, as a child, he couldn't find any purpose or meaning in it, but after listening to it for years, he began to realize everything he thought there was to know, everything there was left to learn and understand. The questions arose spontaneously, and there was no way to stop them, crowding at the threshold of his throat, without himThere was no way for them to express themselves.

That's when his father tried to teach him a writing system to communicate with him. Until then, Joshua only knew numbers. At the school they all attended, each student was assigned a specialization that they would later develop within the city. Numbers had helped him understand his life exclusively as a functional system for his urban work. The symbols his father had precariously taught him were different. He hadn't understood them; he didn't correlate them with the words he spoke. But there was no time for more. It was at that time that city officials arrived to silence him. For the rest of his life, they never knew who had denounced them, and anyway, there was no need for anyone to do so. A voice like his father's, though dark and worn, though precarious, must have been a distinctive sign in that building of thousands of muffled noises, attenuated by the large silencing systems. And somewhere in the government buildings, an alarm had probably sounded, warning of an unauthorized voice.

Joshua uttered something unintelligible, and his nearest companion on the dome's surface looked up at him. He had only made a noise, but there was a word in his mind, so he thought he'd said it. He looked down, afraid the other would report him, but his companion smiled, and then made a noise that made him realize it was the same as the one he had made. No words, just a noise trying to express something, a joke, a sigh, an increase in strength as they positioned the construction material. Sometimes they had to bend down and stand up to advance on the surface, other times they had

to lie down to rivet the alloy from the inside. It was almost always exhausting work, made more difficult by the gases and slowed by the slippery or sticky residue from the rain. Coughs could be heard, and groans from some who were hurting themselves. A couple of times, someone had even fallen to the bottom of the city. On such occasions, the work had continued while everyone checked the proper functioning of their magnetic boots and the harnesses, which, although old-fashioned, could save them from a fatal fall.

Joshua was relieved that his thought hadn't been discovered, and the old word returned to his mind, trying to force its way into his useless throat. A short word, excessively short, easy to pronounce as he had heard it from his father's mouth, and pleasing to the ear, soft and faint like no air he had ever perceived before. He had heard himself say it many times, but now, after a long time, he almost didn't remember it. And yet it returned, without cause or apparent reason, like the thoughts his father had accustomed him to in his long monologues. Words that called out to each other, forming phrases that gradually took shape, and suddenly an idea or a concept was aptly constructed in his mind. A construction perhaps larger than the immense dome that would cover the vast city. A spaceless construction because it encompassed all spaces, and above all because it never disappeared. What is in the mind, the father said, is what defines us.

Then Joshua looked up at the sky filled with enormous gray, silver, and purple clouds. Halos of blinding light denoted the ultraviolet rays that couldn't be filtered at such heights. He made sure his protective suit was tightly closed, because it sometimes tore or its zippers came undone during work. He adjusted his goggles and stood upright on the surface, one gloved hand shielding his eyes. He saw something deep in the sky, and only then did he realize that that was the word that had come to mind in the previous moments. How could he have known before seeing the object that word indicated? But he told himself that as soon as he got up there, he had already seen something different in the sky. So accustomed to the complex, stagnant shadows above the city, he knew the dark maps of the sky around him, and any difference was easily noticeable.

Soon the alarm would sound, but he wasn't going to move until he clearly saw what he had glimpsed. And what was it that he finally saw, or thought he saw? Only a strange shape against the murky sky, like an amoeba subjected to the almost nonexistent ebb and flow of water in a muddy mass of the city's sewers, those that formed the rough periphery of the dome, upon which the foundations of the new construction were raised. But what was in the sky now was a winged creature, approaching clearly. After watching it open, it passed slowly between the dark clouds. The shape grew progressively larger, slowly, but with a determination that began to accelerate the Joshua's reason. The alarm was sounding. If he didn't move in the next three minutes, headquarters would send a signal to start warming up his boots. He would have ten more minutes to respond to the urgency. Then, he would have no choice but to take them off, which meant the risk of falling into the void, or being exiled from the city, which in future terms meant the same kind of death. But something inside him

screamed that he couldn't ignore what he was seeing. He turned his gaze to his companions, but the others didn't seem to have noticed.

The bird—for that was what it was, an enormous bird with outstretched wings—was getting closer, and given its size, it must have already been above them at the height of the dome, and yet it still seemed far away, almost immobilized in its glide, since it barely moved its wings. Joshua could see the slanted eyes, the long beak, the long wings like thin membranes held together by strong fragments that ended in strange hands.

It was getting closer and closer, and the three minutes had passed. His boots were beginning to warm up, but he hardly noticed it yet. The bird emitted a long, shrill cry, and that was when the others took notice. They looked up, stopped their work, and pointed at the bird, then ran across the curved surface of the dome. But Joshua was the only one who didn't move, because he knew the bird wouldn't hurt them, at least not him. It was the bird that had been in his memory for a long time. It was the first specimen he'd seen, the first for everyone in that city, surely, but from the depths no one would have noticed it. Only he, in the dome, would recognize it, because it was exactly like the ones his father had described to him. Prehistoric birds, half reptile, half mammal, the strange mixture that no one had quite understood, just like the old and strange theory that humans were descended from curious animals called apes that lived in trees. Concepts difficult for Joshua to grasp, ancient stories that had more foundations in myth than probable truth.

Nevertheless, there was the bird to corroborate the truths he had heard in his father's defined, sometimes faltering, almost always tired voice. Then a whole world emerged around him: dense jungles of intertwined trees, deep swamps where great animals sank hopelessly, blue skies with a sun so intense it didn't allow rain for many years, and beyond, mountains covered in forests and snow, and farther away, the regions of the sea. Joshua knew, saw, all this, without ever having actually seen it.

The world was the past, now. And the past was more than the sinuous present, the rigorous, terrifying present that was nothing more than the future made now at every moment. There was no future except under the dome, and the dome was not a future but a constant present. A destroying and a building, a locking of time in a continuous, immobilized time capsule.

A constant, inert, stagnant present. Less alive than a rock, and perhaps as similar to steel.

Then the bird was already on the dome, and his boots became so hot that he began to take them off, but before that could happen, his oxygen tank began to run out. He had been breathing rapidly for several minutes, and soon after, he felt his vision blur and his mind fade. He thought his head was hitting the surface of the dome, but he couldn't help but smell the bird that flew so close above him, so close it felt like touching him. The wind its wings raised around him, the dust, the churning clouds that hid its immense form. The shrill cry of the bird, like a triumph, like a song about the civilized world of man. The long, threatening beak it opened barely

reached Joshua, not to devour him, or so he thought, but to speak to him. And in the scent of the wind fanned by the wings, he felt the arrival of the old world, the intense and dazzling return of the past, the overwhelming armies of anger and revenge.

Something would return, he told himself, and he didn't know if his tongue had managed to utter that phrase when he woke up in the infirmary's office. The doctor was looking at him when he removed the oxygen mask. Joshua knew that some of the city officials were capable of speaking; it was, in fact, a requirement to be part of the system of government, but few used such a skill in private life, much less in professional life. The voices he had heard from anyone other than his father were mediated by machines or megaphones, so they sounded impersonal. This time he heard the doctor's voice, but his words didn't match his gaze.

"Next time, pay attention when checking the oxygen tank charge. It was almost at zero when you climbed into the dome."

Joshua stared at him. He had done the right thing, butHe realized the cargo was full upon loading. The doctor, tall, wearing a tight white uniform like a diver's, filled out some forms on the digital spreadsheet he was holding. Then he began to look at him closely.

"Are you okay? If you're worried about what you saw in the dome, apoxia hallucinations are very common, almost the most frequent symptom. Forget what you saw."

As Joshua continued to stare at him, before turning away from him and sitting behind his desk, he said:

"This time I won't mention your negligence in the report, just an equipment malfunction. You may go now; you have the rest of the day off. Good afternoon."

Joshua got up from the stretcher. As soon as his feet touched the floor, a faintness overcame him for a few seconds. The bird's scent returned with the memory, along with the intense sound of its flapping wings, and the sensation he had of seeing himself at the edge of the dome, the abyss of the city lying just a few centimeters away.

The doctor calmed him down, without getting up from his chair:

"Your dizziness will pass in a while. Go outside and clear your head." Then he returned to his duties, which seemed to consist of nothing more than sitting behind the desk, staring at its almost empty surface, only the same sheet of paper, still as a painted poster, a few centimeters wide, that he had dropped from his hands when he sat down.

Joshua went outside; it was even an hour later than he usually finished work. He had been in the infirmary longer than he thought. He looked up. The next shift's employees were working in the dome. There was nothing left but the artificial light from the new projectors located under the beams, and the spotlights that amplified the luminosity. Even so, the deepest parts of the city remained in complete darkness, those between the tall buildings, those closest to the dome's foundations, or those adjacent to

the alloy factories. The route to the apartment wasn't very familiar to him from where he was now coming. He looked curiously at the streets crowded with vehicles stuck on the old asphalt that, once upon a time, with the excessive heat of an explosion that had occurred long before his birth, had melted and risen into the form of waves forever petrified. These were terms his father used, as he showed him, from the window of the apartment they shared, his memories of life in the city.

The streets, then, were like old ruined sculptures, he heard him say, and that phrase brought back memories of the lethargy of a sad, twilight afternoon. He didn't know how, but his father's voice, through the words or their effects on the tone of his voice, was capable of recreating a world forever vanished. That world was now in Joshua's mind, and like a gift, it entranced and tortured him at the same time. Not because it hurt to possess those alien memories, but because he couldn't find any correlations with the reality in which he lived. It was what the old man called deja vu, a strange phrase in the language of the gods, or perhaps of the wise. But what was a god, he would have liked to ask. Were they the city leaders, whom he didn't know, those who organized urban life and had decided on the construction of the dome? Those who communicated through machines with loud voices, as rare as they were arbitrary and almost incomprehensible?

If the few who retained the ability to speak were gods, then his father had been one too. Perhaps that's why the officials got rid of him, not with their own hands, but by depriving him of the only gift that made him like them. Men, like gods, do not tolerate competition, nor the disloyalty of revealing the past—perhaps that was it. But for Joshua's father, the past was nothing more than a present that had not disappeared.

He arrived at the apartment on the one hundred and fiftieth floor, still inhabited by his father's movements in every corner, near every piece of furniture, now scarce, on every sheet and in every glass. On every chair he sat on, in the bathroom where he shaved, in the mirror that died each night of shame at being unable to reflect anything but the blackness of a nothingness that frightened even the mirror itself.

He sat up in bed without undressing and touched his eyes. The tiny projection machines were in the area of his brain next to the optic nerve, implanted by his father one night while Joshua slept, not long before he committed suicide. In the morning, he had felt headaches, under the scars on his temples that were no longer noticeable after several years. Many of the drawings his father had drawn on the sheets remained on the bed, schematics of machines mixed with anatomical organs, with which he had taught him to implant the projectors sold on the black market, as well as that chip that had been embedded in him for some time. “Here,” he had told him. He looked at Joshua, pointing to a part of his head, “There is the past of everything known. What I remember, son, is a brief period of history. The rest of our heritage is in these tiny machines, smaller than the tip of your smallest finger. How sad, isn't it, that this is all that remains, because we can't get inside it, and yet how joyful, because this is precisely all.”

Joshua hadn't used the projectors in a long time, but he knew how to do it. Sometimes they would turn on by themselves during the night, without his intervention, and the images would appear on the ceiling of the apartment, like dreams. This time, however, he didn't turn off the lights, close the windows, or prepare to let the fear of betrayal take over.

He started the system, and the images appeared in front of the bed. At first timidly, then, as if gathering courage, feeding off his own ego, they grew toward the ceiling, toward the other walls, toward the floor, toward the bed, toward the open doors that led to the other rooms, guiding the images toward places he couldn't see but that were undoubtedly there. Then the projected images extended toward the open windows and moved outside, onto the dark sky, over which a rectangle of disjointed and interrupted images formed, cut off by the edges of a too-small theater, where the stages confined the performance to one or two partners exclusively.

In the images, there were entire worlds, there were lakes with boats, rough seas and forests scorched by fires or storms, mountains with peaks cut by immense explosions, and vast armies battling. There were low cities and others high, some razed by war and others under construction. Houses were inhabited or abandoned. Cemeteries and hospitals. Airplanes streaking across the sky and merging into the sun, crashing in bursts of silver and gold. Cultivated fields of terrifyingly varied colors, enormous or tiny animals. Lightning, flashes of lightning, and rain. Deserts with sandstorms, and ancient skeletons of prehistoric animals. Spaceships crashed into beds of mud, buried, rusting like ancient crockery from dead kitchens.

Then the birds appeared. It was a great flock that encompassed the entire room, a flock that never stopped or ceased passing from one side to the other. The birds were like the one he had seen in the dome: wide, outstretched wings of a membranous nature and a long beak. They were undoubtedly prehistoric birds, whose name his father had told him but which he had found difficult to remember. That didn't matter now. They were back. And the birds circled the room, emitting shrill, silent cries because Joshua still didn't dare turn on the audio of the projection machines. But in a strange way, it was no longer necessary. He had already heard that shrill, heart-rending cry, a cry that became a song with its exhausted repetition. A cry that attacked reality from primordial regions shattered by memory.

The shattered memory rearmed itself, replenished itself, and returned. It surrounded Joshua's anguished rest, attacked him. And it seemed that at any moment, the entire city would also succumb.

2

More than three weeks had passed, and no matter how much Joshua searched the horizon every day for signs of the bird, it never reappeared. His mind clung to the seemingly obvious: that perhaps it was he who

projected the image of the immense bird into the sky. If he believed the others had also seen it, it was another work of his mind to set the secondary stage, the necessary background chorus raising their gaze to the same thing he did.

It was after this conviction that his spirits once again calmed down into a monotony that his new concerns had made him miss as a source of security and tranquility. It was true that the city government frowned upon those who caused trouble of any kind, and they knew well that any kind of trouble only comes from the discontent provoked by an overly excited imagination. Therefore, the only option was to nullify the imagination and its connotations or sources, be it madness or sentimentality, or to nullify the person who was the object of that distortion of thought and behavior.

Who knows, Joshua wondered, how the members of the government had begun to think this way? He had no idea of the natural cruelty of man, of course, nor of the ambitions for power that drive him to dominate everything within his reach. He had no way of knowing because there was no communication with other men other than through glances, and his father had omitted any commentary on metaphysical philosophy, not even on psychological or physiological philosophy. Human beings were simply like that, working on the basis of immediate needs. And the most immediate was the construction. ction of the dome to protect themselves from the harmful effects of the environment. But Joshua never wondered why the contrast between the luminous past he heard from his father and the dark and terrible present they were living in. Somehow, and it saddened him to realize this on the lonely nights that followed his first encounter with the bird, or with what he believed was a real bird, he had never believed in the plausibility of those stories and tales his father told him. They fascinated him, it was true, and they began to form essential places in his mind, platforms upon which he would later build the great conceptual structures with which he would conceive the world's past. But such descriptions and concepts had not yet been illuminated in the right way to acquire prominence, and with it, a location in space and time. The day the bird appeared, however, with its realism filled with smells, touches, and sounds, the fantasy with which he had covered the story collapsed, and behind it appeared the sad reality of the past, no more virtuous, not even more epic than the immense construction of the city with its dome. But such a history, however opaque, was something related to his blood. He belonged to it.

This was what he thought about during the last nights of that three-week period. From disillusionment, he moved to a state of alertness. He was no longer worried about the return of the great bird, but he looked up at the sky from time to time like someone looking for signs of a beneficial rain. He had to hide his anxiety if he didn't want to be harmed in his work or cut off from the dome forever. Because now the dome was one of the new platforms in his mind, the highest, without which the bird wouldn't find him. Had it come looking for him? He didn't know the reason for such narcissism. Joshua was just one of many men, neither smarter nor dumber than the others. But he had had the chance to see something more, and that made all the difference. Joshua knew it now with a certainty that was a

kind of newborn pride, something he had never felt until that moment, and it was a beautiful feeling.

Then, on the twenty-first day since the bird's first appearance, he got up like every morning, washed, ate a simple breakfast, dressed, and set out for the dome's ascent area. As he passed through the building's door, he instinctively looked up. Those walking along the sidewalk to work had their heads bowed, attentive only to the tread of their feet on the asphalt. Joshua joined the lines that advanced haphazardly but almost rhythmically. Sometimes he didn't realize he was walking faster, other times slower, and on two occasions he had even stopped when he saw a flying shadow between the open slits in the dome's surface. His heart raced twice, the others pushed him, turned to look at him in surprise, and left him behind. He, however, knew that on their faces there was stupefaction and pain, the terrible sorrow that the bird had passed without seeing him, and that therefore it would not return to look for him. He had to go up soon, he told himself, and then he quickened his pace, pushing almost the same people who had bumped into him a moment before. When he reached the elevator area, he was the first to get inside. The climb was as always, rapid, almost imperceptible. The low houses disappeared, the tall buildings died one by one as he ascended, and the clouds thickened, and the acid rain began to stick to his insulated suit.

At the top, he put on his magnetic boots and goggles. He grabbed his toolbox, put on his backpack with almost all the equipment he needed, and headed toward the open lips of the dome. For the first time, he realized the distance between them wasn't far. He looked toward the other lip of the opening, beyond the abyss at the bottom of which lay the city like a jewel to be protected, whose beauty had been lost long before, so long ago that no one alive remembered what it had once been like. Perhaps archives and documents were preserved; his father had mentioned this possibility, but never spoke much about it. The only data they could obtain, he said, was from those chips smuggled on the black market. He could never, he said, discover where they came from or who had recorded them, but their authenticity was undeniable, because the same thing he read in them was in the old paper archives he had seen as a child. He said the word "books" many times, but like so many others whose meaning he couldn't define and therefore difficult to remember, Joshua paid no attention to it.

Ten minutes passed. He looked up at the sky. As always, the gases contained indescribable, new, and unrepeatable forms, constant in their continual diversity. He let an hour pass and looked again. Now a narrow sun was trying to force its way through the purple, red, Blue, with a whole spectrum of nuances without distinction. It was a cold sun, more dead than the old moon that his father spoke about. I had no idea what that moon was like, and it was not worth knowing anyway, destroyed as it should have been for the old spacecraft that I had ever spoken.

Nothing yet. Maybe, I wouldn't return. He no longer felt sure of anything. The excitement of that morning was disappearing from his mood after noon. In mid -afternoon, he no longer found signs of her or in her body or in her mind. His eyes were fixed in the movement of his hands, because he

discovered in them a very slight tremor that embarrassed him. In his throat he had a knot that forced him to swallow saliva not to cry. How long that did not happen, since he was a child, long before his father threw himself out the window. Not even that day he cried. Only later, at night, when I knew that no one could see or listen to it. Then, such a wish did not feel again. And the day was dying without distinguishing him from the other days.

When the twilight time approached, whose sky was barely differentiated from the rest of the day, gathered his instruments, he was straightening his back, and making an effort to lift his eyes, because he did not want to verify what he already sensed that he was going to find, he looked at the west who had taken the colors of the flames that came out of the mouth of the dragons. But what have I said? He thought, and for the first time he referred himself as a speaker, even if he had not pronounced anything aloud. His surprise was double, for this reference to himself, so new and curious, and also because of the idea he had just thought. The dragons were mythical beings, invented by ancient legends, who were traveling around the world with large wings and fired by their mouths.

In the sky, in the distance, the bird appeared finally, at the end of the day, as if I came to look for it to take it home. He listened to the strong, increasingly intense graznido, and was afraid. The other men at the top of the dome looked at the bird and began to run, some fleeing to the elevators, others approaching Joshua with curiosity. They had their arms raised by pointing to the bird, while it was approaching very fast, so much that its size was obviously large, while their wings folded and deployed in movements that raised a wind with acre aroma.

Joshua heard of the guttural sounds that had never heard in them before. Some attached to him, trembling, maybe because he kept calm and still. But inside it also trembled. I was afraid not of the bird, but what would happen now, what would the men of the city do. Because the noise of the alarms began to sound intensely, and his companions then, already definitely scared, threw themselves to the ground, while others continued fleeing up, without realizing how close the unfinished edges of the dome were. It was inevitable, and Joshua could do nothing, because nothing came out of his throat when he wanted to warn them. They were like children who believed herself in the duty to protect. He listened to the speakers that were only used in serious emergencies of the city, and the voices of the leaders, already recorded for very different occasions to it, ordered to keep calm and evacuate the place due to emergency exits. All that sounded very old for Joshua. The city was actually helpless for any catastrophe. It was like an old woman who tried to defend against an attack with only the rests of a well -educated voice.

The bird was already on the dome. The shadow of his wings went and went on the surface and on the men who ran towards the abyss of the city. Joshua saw them fleeing the heads with their hands, while the bird persecuted them and their wings barely touched them. But they ran and fell, and the bird continued around in countless laps, until the army guardians with firearms rose. Joshua saw them get out of the elevators and

form in several rows pointing to the bird, and fired once after another. Those who remained on the dome covered their ears, even Joshua could not resist the noise of weapons. He threw himself to the ground, while seeing the shadow of the bird around the surface of the dome tirelessly. Every time he passed him, the shadow caused him a chill as if he brought, sheltered in his wings, the cold of the winter of distant places. I had never felt such cold. His skin, under the suit, was bristle and sore, his arms and legs trembled while a burst continued spinning inside his suit. He looked up when the bird was approaching him. The bird's face was so strange, elongated, with a huge beak and a tall crest that further accentuated the authority its long wings had demonstrated from the beginning.

The bird began a low flight. The birds scythed over the men's backs, tearing at their suits, drawing blood. Many threw themselves into the void in desperation; others were caught in its talons and fell through the air with their limbs torn. There was a lot of blood above the dome, many silent screams from the mouths of the living and the dead. Only the bird's triumphant cry could be heard shrilly, encompassing the sky and the entire city. Joshua guessed that from the streets, the inhabitants would be looking up at the dome, trying to guess what was happening up above. They were probably already hiding in their homes, and emergency vehicles were out on the streets to collect the bodies that had fallen. Joshua knew the bird wouldn't harm him, and when he heard the incessant gunfire, he feared for it. Its skin seemed to resist the bullets tenaciously, but Joshua didn't know how much longer it could hold out. If he'd had a voice to scream, he would have naively told her to escape for her life, to come back later, or not to come back if she was in danger of dying. He felt sorry for that beast whose force compelled her to return again and again for no apparent reason from the past, bringing a history that was dead, and whose representative, or last exponent, she was. Why that message? Joshua wondered; or perhaps it wasn't, but a kind of mission. How could he be sure that the world had disappeared forever along with its history? He didn't feel sorry for the men who were dying, he felt nothing for them. They were his contemporaries, and he saw himself reflected in them as in a mirror until recently. But the voice of his mind differentiated him. Something had emerged behind him, pushing him, crushing him crudely as the bird was doing now. Things from the history of the world, from his own past that he didn't know, were making their way in, whether he wanted it or not. Resistance didn't exist in contemporary beings, only the ability to hide under a dome that would preserve the present as an organism that would slowly die in its own isolation.

The only important thing now was that the bird be saved. Therefore, it raised an arm, visible above the surface of the dome, when everyone was already on the ground, dead or shielding their heads. Even the soldiers were firing from that position. And it was at that instant, when Joshua raised his arm, that the bird abruptly changed its low flight and ascended in a direction that led away from the dome and the city.

The alarms ceased. The workers remained still, following the orders of the voices on the loudspeakers. The soldiers stood up and scanned the surface of the dome. They pushed the men's bodies to check if they were alive. The

dead were thrown over the edge, the others were lifted and carried toward the elevators. When they approached Joshua, who was still holding his arm raised, they shook him with the barrels of their guns and dragged him across the surface. They hit him on the head because he had resisted, so he couldn't see their descent toward the city, nor did he know how long it took him to wake up in the infirmary, which this time was packed with wounded men. Several doctors were suturing wounds, amid a silence of whispered voices, the metallic sounds of instruments and machines, and the groans of the wounded. All of this was silence, because they were so subtle that they accentuated precisely what could not be heard: the cries that would never be uttered because the suffering men had lost the habit of speaking. Pain is also a thought that can be expressed with words, and Joshua was beginning to learn that words comfort and dull pain. His father had survived all this time because he knew how to speak, and when they burned his tongue, he had no choice but to kill himself. If you don't talk, you act, Joshua told himself. He woke up mumbling a word, and the doctors were looking at him attentively. They put an oxygen mask on him, and he had to keep quiet. Many hours later, the infirmary was almost empty. He wasn't injured, but they had left him there for who knows what reason. He was drugged, he realized, and he knew that everyone knew what he had done in the dome when he raised his arm. Somehow, the bird had obeyed him. The door opened and several soldiers appeared. They made him stand up and two of them carried him because he could barely stand. He felt himself being guided through long corridors he wasn't familiar with. Occasionally, he heard the sounds of the city, very close, above them, but he didn't know if they were traveling underground toward the government offices. Surely that was the case. They were taking him to the authorities to give explanations. He laughed, and the soldiers looked at him. How could he explain, he asked himself, if he couldn't speak? He continued smiling until he reached a large white door that opened slowly, and he found himself in the middle of an enormous room full of workers andThey stood in a row. Many were survivors of the massacre, but the rest were healthy. At the front of the crowd were the heads of government. He had never seen them before, but he guessed it was them, of course. When they placed him in the front row, in a space they had reserved for him, the men behind the desks began speaking into machines in front of their mouths. Their voices were not like his father's; they were muffled by amplification systems that distorted them.

"Citizens, a state of siege is declared. No one will be allowed to leave their homes, except for the dome workers."

The soldiers then pushed everyone toward the exits, but Joshua was held in the empty room, with the exception of the heads of government. These were men dressed in neat suits, uniformed in a white color that contrasted with their exhausted faces, full of dark wrinkles, with small eyes like shiny stones set in their faces. They didn't look like men, even though they were bleeding; they were talking systems, nothing more.

"You, citizen, will go up to the dome every day. You will live up there until it is finished. You will not be excused from work."

A soldier carried him back through the corridors to the infirmary. Then they injected him again, and he knew he would sleep for long hours. And until he awoke, work on the dome, and life in the city besieged by the bird, would be interrupted. He fell asleep, sedated in the growing bed of thoughts.

How could he wake up, he asked himself, when all reality resembles a dream? What if memories are dreams, or dreams are also real? There are different planes of reality, his father said. If one of them is fantasy, the rest are too. If we apply the laws of logic to disprove any of those planes, we must also apply them to the others. Therefore, either everything is a dream dreamed by some higher deity, or everything is so real, and therefore occurs simultaneously in time and space. And Joshua's memories, as well as his father's, must have been real not only because they were continually returning from memory, but because they could be expressed in words, even if they weren't spoken. Joshua's dream immersed him in his father's various stories. And he suddenly remembered one he had told him one night before falling asleep, and which had remained in his memory like a fiction. "Your grandfather," he had said, "and I had to flee to the higher ground. Everyone was escaping to the high mountains. Those with money fled in vehicles called blimps, old contraptions modernized for such mass travel. But most of the population had no means of escaping the floods. I was a rebel back then, and I became a murderer. I killed many by shooting at the blimps, because I thought it wasn't fair that some were saved and we weren't." Your grandfather's dignity didn't allow him to trample on his peers, so I felt ashamed and decided to stay with him, even though he had stolen money to get tickets. It was a sad time, son; the waters were rising and people were dying. Your grandfather died a few months later, and I only made my mother's life miserable by continuing to attack the airships. She wouldn't flee, nor would she welcome me home. I was an outcast, a renegade, a persecuted person at that time. The world was flooded, species were becoming extinct, the only survivors were the birds, and they began to fly over the earth, nesting in the same mountains as men. I finally abandoned my mother and went with my friends in the electric vehicles we stole, toward the highlands. With the same weapons we used to shoot at the airships, we killed the birds for food. But they reproduced faster than we destroyed them, and they began to attack our villages and settlements. There was no alternative but to protect ourselves with domes built from logs and stones, as the ancients had done. Then the villages became cities, like the one we live in. The thin air was difficult to breathe, so filters and masks began to appear. Scientists created bombs to destroy the birds that threatened us. Blimps carried them in their bellies, and they exploded in the high nests where the young lived. But the bombs poisoned the atmosphere along with the birds, and acid rain began to fall. Clouds in the mountains formed with toxic gases, and storms over the ocean poisoned the waters, and fish were no longer edible. Then there was no alternative but to develop industries within the cities, alternative foods for an ever-decreasing human population. This happened very quickly, no more than forty years. That's why, when you were born, I was already a grown man. My Neraration could witness many changes, and destructive of each of those changes. The airships disappeared, crashed in the mountains or

accidents in the ocean. Now we are like clans locked in large mountains isolated by huge insurmountable oceans. Consuming and recycling the same means of subsistence. Your mother died in a recycled food factory, and had stopped speaking a long time before, consumed her throat by cancer that radiation had been born. I spoke to him, as I do now, because I didn't want to forget the past. The way we had ever been.

That same night, Joshua began to feel headache at the height of his temples. His father held him against the bed, tied, as he touched a scalpel on both sides of his head. He felt he was bleeding, but soon something penetrated behind his eyes, a cold metal. Later he knew that they were the projectors, but when he had only felt nausea and an intense anger towards the old man, who was then looking at him with the deepest sadness he had ever seen in him.

He recalled a gesture that he thought he had forgotten: his father had pointed out his own head before throwing himself out the window of the floor one hundred and fifty. At that time he thought he was referring to projector machines; But it wasn't possible, he wondered, that he had inserted a chip like the one he wore? There was something called subliminal message, which according to his father was used to induce forms of behavior in the old world. The chip worked that way, not only by introducing conscious knowledge, but inducing them in deeper planes. So that thought trained with the learning of words that would otherwise take years to apprehend. And thought would re -restore the physiological use of forgotten capacities.

Joshua had to speak again.

It was thus that from the dream induced by the pharmacology, he woke up pronouncing words not very clear because his throat did not obey him at all and his vocal cords were stunted, his dry respiratory tract and his tongue was a knead of clumsy muscles.

The doctors who watched him looked at each other, neither amazed nor scared. They rose from their seats, approached Joshua and released him, like an animal that had learned his first lesson satisfactorily.

3

He did not live again in the department. They gave him a room in the nursing units. It could enter and leave only within the courtyards and areas determined by the perimeters of the building. He knew they watched him. He was aware that his own person was of a special value now for everyone in the city, and especially for government authorities. They had seen him order something to the bird, and how it had obeyed it. They heard him pronounce words in dreams, and although he did not remember them, he

did know that his mind had taken another dimension in those few hours. Maybe it was only the final expression of a process that had been developing since he was a child.

He touched his temples, and felt the scars marks under the skin. They were no longer seen, but they retained a rough tissue on the bone. Maybe his father had inserted a chip like his, in addition to the projector machines. These were sold in the black market as entertainment instruments, and their trade was not as persecuted as that of the chips, prohibited because, as Joshua now knew, they were transmitters of knowledge that almost no one possessed. Knowledge is the past, and until a few days ago we would have wondered what the past had to do with them. If there had been everything that his father told him, it was a fantastic fable that in no way or disturbed the present. Rather, it was clear that he disturbed in a disturbing way, because that knowledge of the past had the peculiarity of adhering to the scarce memory of contemporary men, and turning there as a seed in weak terrain, but of hidden nutrients. It was curious how words were forming more quickly at every moment, I saw them pass as if they were birds through the sky of their mind. No, he surely had no chip in the lobes of his brain. If I had it, it would be as lucid as your father had been. His was pure learning, slowly, somehow subliminal throughout the years he had passed with the old man, until the first word was formed in his mouth, and then everything was so easy, so fluid the flow of words, that there was no way to stop them. They arrived and went before their meaning understood, but it didn't matter. They were, and the phrases that were Armando brought ancestral reminiscences, images by any contemporary imagined, smells, shapes, sites, facts. And everything the old man had told him was taking on a more concrete reality than the present reality. The dome, the city, the acid rain, the silence of the inhabitants dominated by mechanical noises, seemed like a fantasy unfolding in the distant depths of his mind, already so lucid, broad, and lively. That was the exact word, as if memory, now mature, had taken the power of his person to become, on its own, an immense entity more ambitious than the physical. Because the material had the peculiarity of dying, of being destroyed, and yet memory traversed time without diminishing its quality. It could be set aside, but not forgotten, denied but not destroyed. And it returned, as the bird had returned.

Every day, he was taken under guard to the surface of the dome. Three soldiers accompanied him in the elevator and at the top while he worked. Several weeks passed, and yet the guard did not weaken in its rigor, nor did his hope. What a beautiful word, Joshua thought to himself. What a peculiar sound, what strange and imprecise connotations it still held for him. Thinking a word wasn't the same as saying it. By passing it through the physiology of his throat, it took on a form as concrete as his own, a construction formed in the air that remained for a long time and had the remarkable virtue of fostering thought in those who heard it. He knew that the soldiers guarding him somehow understood, and that the doctors were uneasy, astonished, to have found in the civilian population that capacity abolished for so many years. He had no way of knowing what the government thought, but Joshua undoubtedly represented a weapon at this moment against a danger they surely didn't fully understand, but they had

an idea of what he meant beyond the inconveniences and interruptions in the construction of the dome. They were dominated by the present, by the reality of acid rain and toxic gases. Movement and construction were the canons to uphold, to respect, to which they clung in order to continue living. Poor animals, Joshua told himself, they are less than mollusks, less than larvae. Even irrational beings possess instinct as wisdom. And in these words, he remembered his father's lessons.

But one day, almost three months later, Joshua raised his gaze to the sky and fixed his eyes on the horizon. The soldiers noticed, and the other workers, who since his return had known the role of their now strange companion, so important as to utter words and be guarded by the government, also took notice. Their attention was focused on Joshua's gestures, hoping, perhaps, to hear a word from someone who had once been like them. They respected him, feared him, as one respects and fears the unknown.

There was a long line on the horizon, even and unbroken, which was strange given the symbolism that gas clouds acquired with their diverse shapes and colors every day. He discovered it very early in the morning. He observed it for several minutes, and when he noticed that the others were following his gaze, he returned to his work. Perhaps he was mistaken in what he saw. He noticed, however, that the others were monitoring the sky more closely. It was mid-afternoon when the long line had transformed into a blanket that covered the entire surrounding horizon. It wasn't at a specific cardinal point, but everywhere. Many stopped their work, but there were no alarms to force them to restart. Surely the city government saw the same thing they did. Joshua noticed movement among the soldiers watching him; someone was communicating with them via the transmitter. They told Joshua to get up, because until then he had continued working, as if indifferent to the task to which he had actually been assigned. He wasn't nervous, but he sensed something he didn't understand, and it frightened him. He couldn't think only of the present; something else lurked in that circumference that loomed over the city.

An hour later, the great greenish-black blanket hid the clouds and had stopped the acid rain. It was an immense circumference that was approaching to cover the city like a new living dome. From the precarious metal and concrete dome, they saw the underside of that mantle moving with gentle waves, as if they were looking at the inverted surface of a rough sea.

Those waves were the movement of birds.

It wasn't just one anymore, but thousands, surely millions of ancient birds approaching the city. And the sound of their cries became strident as almost everyone removed their protective masks. There were no more gases or rain to protect themselves from; the air was almost neutral, except for that new aroma they sensed, the smell of old animals, of damaged flesh, and of blood.

"The smell of carrion," Joshua said loudly.

The few who heard him looked at him incomprehensibly, but suddenly their faces turned pale. They transformed with terror. The soldiers took up their weapons and fired into the sky. The futility of that act was followed by more acts they presumed to be futile: bombs thrown from the outskirts of the dome, orders to evacuate it. Then everyone looked at Joshua, who raised both arms high, and the birds' advance stopped.

The squawking continued, the smell lingered, but the flight of the countless birds was frozen in the sky, covering everything except the center above the city, which looked like an enormous, sick, blind pupil. The men watched Joshua with fear and veneration. In that man with his arms raised, they saw the god who had long since disappeared from their minds, the idea of whom was now as strange as his need was incomprehensible. They saw in Joshua's eyes the rider of ancient leviathans advancing in hordes, lashing the seas, flooding the lands. Joshua, the rider of the skies who dominated the sea of birds that now arrived from who knew where. It was the fault of a soldier, one of many, who perhaps thoughtlessly, probably out of desperation, moved toward him, threatening to point the machine gun at his stomach. Joshua looked into his eyes, and the episode in his father's apartment returned clearly, replaying itself on the surface of the dome like the projectors. The entry into the apartment, the attack and subjugation of the old man, the way they forced his mouth open so they could burn his tongue with the cattle prod. And the father's silence became a shape in the sky, became birds. The silence called out to the ancestral birds, who had perhaps been waiting a long time for that noiseless and strident call, a call as equable and honorable as only silence can be. Silence as the appropriate response, the dignified answer, the greatest sign of love. Joshua looked away from the soldier, who was now nothing more than a fearful individual of aching flesh. He looked up at the waiting birds, saw the gleam of their eyes in their greenish-black bodies, and it was like knowing he was just another bird among them all. He moved his arms slowly, lowering them first. Everyone stared at him, mouths agape. Then he began to raise them in a different way than he had done before. He raised them outstretched and back, as if they were wings. What was this man going to do? was the question that was guessed in the thoughts of all the men watching him, and Joshua smiled a smile that connoted mockery and contempt. Then his arms, reaching a height just above his shoulders, made a sudden gesture—so fast that almost no one noticed it until it was too late—forward. A war cry emerged from Joshua's throat.

And the birds advanced.

The birds descended toward the dome, row upon row, like an overwhelming army. One after another, they glided across the surface of the dome, pushing men into the abyss above the city, grabbing them with their long beaks and then dropping their bodies. The men ran in all directions, heedless of the voids they found at the top. Emergency sirens blared, screams filled the loudspeakers, and Joshua sensed the terror of the rulers locked in the city's underground. From the streets, sounds of collisions, metal, and guttural screams could be heard. The birds then began to push the scaffolding and construction machinery with their heavy bodies. He saw them lift large pieces of debris with their talons and drop them like old

catapults onto the dome. The structure began to crack, and the dome began to collapse, while the birds settled on the large beams that remained high, like the ribs of an ancient prehistoric animal. The city resembled that, and perhaps they took the place and adapted it to their desire.

The dome collapsed in large fragments that fell on the streets, but also on the buildings. These would not hold the weight, Joshua knew. When he looked over the edge, he saw the buildings erupting over the streets, raising clouds of dust and debris. He saw bodies fleeing to the periphery in the dome's foundations, where unfinished open areas remained. The survivors, if there were any, where would they flee outside the city? What lay beyond, but vast oceans, as his father had told him.

The dome continued to collapse, and it fell on the buildings and on the men. Joshua knew it was a god, because he saw himself in a place that would not hold much longer, his arms raised, with hundreds of birds fluttering around him, perhaps guarding him, perhaps stalking him. It resembled the eye of a hurricane, and the birds the centripetal force that destroyed everything. The air was filled with the smell of death and carrion, and for a momentAs long as that destruction, the present was the past. It abandoned its triviality, its inconstancy, its hallucination, and let the past dominate its weak domesticity and impregnate it with unbreakable strength. Because the force of the wind is greater than that of metal, and the consistency of flesh more permanent than that of a building. A construction crumbles, but the flesh, inhabited by silent screams, latent gestures, irascibility and weary love, makes its way through the slow, gentle, circular steps of the present.

Joshua watched the birds settle one by one on the arched beams, dominating the immense cage from which they seemed to have escaped. And when the fragment of the dome he was on began to collapse, he felt a bird grab him by the back with its talons. He felt the wrenching pain in his muscles, but he endured the pain, because he saw his body rising into the air above the city, which stretched out like a hecatomb. He saw the almost destroyed dome, the dust from the buildings that would take days to settle, the crushed bodies of men, the movements of the survivors in search of the city's exits. Slowly, the bird carried him higher and higher, and the pain in his back increased, and he was about to say: please, don't hurt me anymore. He wanted to look at the bird, but he couldn't move his head, and he felt it lower its long beak in front of him, as if it wanted to speak to him. He heard only the dry croak, incongruous with all mercy. Just a physiological sound.

Now he felt himself being carried toward the outskirts of the city, as it slowly disappeared into the horizon of its destruction. He was afraid of what he would see beyond, but the bird descended in a slow glide, and he could contemplate the outer limits, which he had rarely seen. Men and women were slowly emerging through the narrow openings, but they would continue to emerge for days, a new and final diaspora to unknown regions. Joshua saw, from above, the rocks that made up the high mountains where the city had been built. He expected to see the waters in the distance, which, according to his father, had been formed by ancient floods.

Time passed, while the pain in his back, excruciating and burning, made him fear being dismembered and falling into the void, which was nothing more than rock, then earth miles away, and later sand. The sky he had seen all his life was now a limpid, crystal-clear, blinding blue. The sun shone in a way that was harmful to his eyes. The heat burned him, and sweat soaked his clothes, along with his blood. The bird cried from time to time, as if announcing the long and painful journey of a hopeless voyage.

But the oceans had disappeared, and the day was dying. An intense twilight, pinkish, then reddish and even, was appearing in the west. The sun was setting on the vast expanse of sand and more sand, everywhere. And Joshua guessed that he would no longer see the longed-for water the old man had told him about. The survivors of the city would find nothing but stone and sand. How to make a fire with those materials, how to build weapons for hunting, or where to find a fertile place to grow even a seed. Somewhere, perhaps, far away, after walking a long, long time. But that was no longer a matter for him. Joshua and the bird were one, now.

Both were traveling toward a region that perhaps not even the bird knew. He noticed it circle, glide, and spin, continuing its journey, slowly and leisurely, occasionally emitting a squawk that was a cry of immense sadness. Then Joshua said something out loud. It was a call, a plea filled with anguish, something more like a cry than a word, which completed the landscape of lurking shadows, slowly and surely, toward which the bird was heading. In the claws that began to grip him more roughly and mercilessly, he heard his father's tears and final bitterness, and then they released him, letting him fall into the sands of nothingness.

THE MACHINES

1

I looked up from my book when the alarm sounded. The red light flickered on the screen. Another death, I told myself. And this time, being the tenth in the same week, it produced a strange feeling in my throat. But more than sadness for this loss, since it was a stranger to me, what I felt was something very close to dread. My heart suddenly began to beat faster, and a tightness in my chest reminded me of the long list of illnesses that affected members of my family. This was one of the reasons why I entered the Academy of Machine Attendants. It was a professional profession that undoubtedly brought prestige to those who pursued it. Curiosity to know the causes of death in my family guided me, without a doubt, but the expectation was much greater than the results obtained. At the Academy, they only taught how to drive andControlling the machines. We were more like officiants and statisticians than men charged with ensuring the health of others.

Sometimes, my curiosity, undoubtedly greater than that of my classmates, fueled by the bitterness of my father's and grandfather's deaths, and by the long and painful illness my mother suffered for many years, led me to ask

my teachers when we would learn about anatomy and physiology. I was just one of hundreds of students sitting in the stands of those grandstands built many centuries before, in the middle of meadows under ever-changing skies, almost always cold and rainy. I had a feeling that those stone seats had once been occupied by beings more intelligent than us. There was something hovering on the surface of that educational center, which, however, couldn't be captured on the large screens installed in front of the stands, where nothing more than countless numbers appeared, representing the numbers of life and death among the world's population.

We are statisticians, I told myself when I was still a student. We record data for the management of the world's economy. It was necessary, we were taught, and we learned to understand and assimilate it, that human survival depends on the fluctuating balance between food resources and population numbers. Everything else, I was told, was superfluous. Then I knew that all the knowledge we didn't possess was everything we had forgotten. We would no longer know what we had known, because the cycle of learning and teaching had been interrupted by other, more pressing needs of the world.

The flickering red light, that oppression in my chest, and the weight of those claustrophobic years at the Academy surrounded by formulas and numbers, lists, and screens, agonizing and pale, like old men, came together to make me understand an essential but still uncertain point for me that day. A phrase in the book I was reading came to mind like a revelation, and I told myself that something much larger than the enormous organization that dominated the world with its machines and numbers still persisted. Something that linked sensations, visions, and premonitions. The author of the book I was reading, a twentieth-century writer named Bioy Casares, about whom I found no further information, said that every machine is in the process of extinction.

I touched my chest with one hand, and remembering that my father and grandfather had done the same when they felt ill, I got up from the chair and left the control booth. The air in the countryside was fresh. I inhaled deeply the scent of damp grass and looked up at the sky. Large clouds were approaching from the south, black storm clouds laden with rain. I then looked at the long line of patients forming at the doors of the machine I was in charge of. They were unaware of what had just happened, nor of the previous deaths that same week. It was true, I insisted on reminding myself, that a certain number of deaths must occur with a certain frequency. We don't cure people; only machines do. I remembered the interrogation I'd received on the day of my final exam.

- What does the Red Light mean?

- Cessation of life.

- To what should it be attributed?

- To the interruption of vital signs at the exact limit of the patient's lifespan, beyond which it is impossible to recover them.

- Causes?

- Illness, the exhaustion of the life cycle, or abrupt trauma that disrupts functions.

The time for questions was over, but my doubts continued to flow and circle in my brain. How did machines cure people? I wondered where the elixir was that flowed from the bowels of the large machines installed along the roads. These buildings were initially the size of a room in a family home, but were gradually built larger and larger, reaching over a hundred meters long and almost fifty meters wide, with a hemisphere for a roof and two doors at the ends, one for entry and one for exit. I knew they had existed for over a hundred years, and various models had succeeded one another. At the Academy, only brief, sporadic historical information was given to liven up the exhausting cycles of arithmetic and statistics. But my curiosity arose more than anything from the certain fact that my family ancestors had participated not only in the construction of the machines, but also in the development of the projects related to their invention. My family, therefore, at some point in the last century, was dismissed in its importance. No precise data persisted in the municipal archives, and my father and grandfather had died when I was a child. I was unable to obtain any information about my mother; her long-standing senility prevented her from even recognizing me. It was like a plant that had to be maintained. Controlling the machines. We were more like officiants and statisticians than men charged with ensuring the health of others.

Sometimes, my curiosity, undoubtedly greater than that of my classmates, fueled by the bitterness of my father's and grandfather's deaths, and by the long and painful illness my mother suffered for many years, led me to ask my teachers when we would learn about anatomy and physiology. I was just one of hundreds of students sitting in the stands of those grandstands built many centuries before, in the middle of meadows under ever-changing skies, almost always cold and rainy. I had a feeling that those stone seats had once been occupied by beings more intelligent than us. There was something hovering on the surface of that educational center, which, however, couldn't be captured on the large screens installed in front of the stands, where nothing more than countless numbers appeared, representing the numbers of life and death among the world's population.

We are statisticians, I told myself when I was still a student. We record data for the management of the world's economy. It was necessary, we were taught, and we learned to understand and assimilate it, that human survival depends on the fluctuating balance between food resources and population numbers. Everything else, I was told, was superfluous. Then I knew that all the knowledge we didn't possess was everything we had forgotten. We would no longer know what we had known, because the cycle of learning and teaching had been interrupted by other, more pressing needs of the world.

The flickering red light, that oppression in my chest, and the weight of those claustrophobic years at the Academy surrounded by formulas and numbers, lists, and screens, agonizing and pale, like old men, came together to make me understand an essential but still uncertain point for me that day. A phrase in the book I was reading came to mind like a

revelation, and I told myself that something much larger than the enormous organization that dominated the world with its machines and numbers still persisted. Something that linked sensations, visions, and premonitions. The author of the book I was reading, a twentieth-century writer named Bioy Casares, about whom I found no further information, said that every machine is in the process of extinction.

I touched my chest with one hand, and remembering that my father and grandfather had done the same when they felt ill, I got up from the chair and left the control booth. The air in the countryside was fresh. I inhaled deeply the scent of damp grass and looked up at the sky. Large clouds were approaching from the south, black storm clouds laden with rain. I then looked at the long line of patients forming at the doors of the machine I was in charge of. They were unaware of what had just happened, nor of the previous deaths that same week. It was true, I insisted on reminding myself, that a certain number of deaths must occur with a certain frequency. We don't cure people; only machines do. I remembered the interrogation I'd received on the day of my final exam.

- What does the Red Light mean?

- Cessation of life.

- To what should it be attributed?

- To the interruption of vital signs at the exact limit of the patient's lifespan, beyond which it is impossible to recover them.

- Causes?

- Illness, the exhaustion of the life cycle, or abrupt trauma that disrupts functions.

The time for questions was over, but my doubts continued to flow and circle in my brain. How did machines cure people? I wondered where the elixir was that flowed from the bowels of the large machines installed along the roads. These buildings were initially the size of a room in a family home, but were gradually built larger and larger, reaching over a hundred meters long and almost fifty meters wide, with a hemisphere for a roof and two doors at the ends, one for entry and one for exit. I knew they had existed for over a hundred years, and various models had succeeded one another. At the Academy, only brief, sporadic historical information was given to liven up the exhausting cycles of arithmetic and statistics. But my curiosity arose more than anything from the certain fact that my family ancestors had participated not only in the construction of the machines, but also in the development of the projects related to their invention. My family, therefore, at some point in the last century, was dismissed in its importance. No precise data persisted in the municipal archives, and my father and grandfather had died when I was a child. I was unable to obtain any information about my mother; her long-standing senility prevented her from even recognizing me. It was like a plant that had to be maintained. The treatment had led to irreversible failure of the renal system. From then on, I wouldn't know what was going to happen. The computer didn't report the healing methodology, only the positive or negative result. I had learned

to interfere with the system, finding alternative methods for searching files that few of my colleagues knew about, let alone dared to use, or in which they couldn't find any purpose. I thought about my ancestors, about the knowledge they had acquired to create the machines, and I wondered about the reason for my ignorance, my sacred ignorance. Because they were now our gods.

There was a gap between causes and results that widened with each question I asked myself, to the point that every record entered into the system was, to me, a superstition, almost an act of rigged magic, a falsehood, or a vice. The results were no longer valid for their presence or their meaning, because they lacked explanation. Therefore, they lacked the truth, or at least fell into areas of darkness where it was difficult to see clearly.

There was a loud, harsh scream, rarely heard echoing in the corridors and recesses of the machine, as if it were an old, uninhabited house. It was the voice of the woman who had entered. I pressed keys on my keyboard, opened various files, and cycled through programs. Nothing answered. Computers had been reprogrammed many times since the days when my family members had participated in their creation. What the new generations didn't know couldn't be incorporated into the system. Therefore, the futility of my desperation was evident, as was my accelerated heart rate and the sweat on my body. I felt my hands tremble: it was the second death I'd seen coming in less than two hours. When the red light finally came on, I took my hands off the keyboard and literally collapsed in my seat. I heard the exit door open, watching the old man walking alone on the monitor, his shoulders slumped and his feet almost dragging. Simultaneously, the entrance door opened to admit another patient.

During the afternoon, one hundred and two people passed through the machine under my care. Thirty never came out again. An average of seventy percent efficiency was a figure that would initiate investigations into my case. How could I respond to them that it was the machine that was failing, that perhaps it was killing the patients? How could I respond to the authorities that if we didn't know how they worked, there was no way to prevent these deaths except to shut down the machine. In more than a century since its invention, not one had been shut down, only when it had spontaneously stopped working. To do so, the entrance door closed automatically, never to be opened again. No one went in to look for any problems, or even out of simple curiosity to know the cause. At least nothing that had been recorded in the systems. At eight o'clock at night, the rain was pouring down on the field. The mud rose a few inches from the ground as the thick drops of rain splashed onto the people waiting in line, which was no less long than during the afternoon. No one relieved me of my duty; the shifts were twenty-four hours a day. During the night, there were four more deaths. A child who had been run over, with severed limbs and a cracked skull, was placed on the conveyor belt and never came out. The parents waited at the door. I watched them from the monitor; their bodies moved restlessly in the rain. Forty minutes later, the entrance door opened to admit another patient. Upon exiting, he met the couple waiting

for their child. The three looked at each other for a moment. The mother touched the man's arm, questioning him with that gesture, but he wore an expression of total ignorance and stepped aside, walking down the path. Then the parents also left. In the man's expression, I saw myself reflected, recognizing my own ignorance, which was no longer a place of comfort and sacred innocence, but an ailment that was beginning to plague me, hurting my body and upsetting my nerves, irritating my tired eyes and distracting the attention I once paid to my work.

By the time morning came, I had a total of 217 patients, 90 of whom hadn't left. I pressed the send button for the health service center. I would soon receive news. I put on my jacket and left the booth. The rain had stopped, but the temperature had dropped significantly. A damp wind chilled my skin beneath my coat. I glanced toward the entrance; the line continued, unscathed and renewed. I passed my replacement on the way to the city. His car, like mine, flashed its lights. I felt protected inside the car, warm, calm. I could have stayed there forever. Once I told myself I was also a machine, and that the eternal stay I desired was that of the dead in the machine. I shifted in my seat, arms crossed, contemplating the images on the dashboard of the car driving on autopilot. Where is it taking me, I wondered. I turned around to contemplate the building that was receding and shrinking, the machine that had been assigned to me eight years ago, and that was part of my brain as I was part of theirs.

"Deux ex machina," I murmured, and the car's computer immediately began searching its files for meanings. It found none. It is known that, in general, no entity knows itself.

2

The car arrived at the gravel driveway in front of the house. The rainy morning had left marks of animals, people, and cars in the surrounding area. The trees I had planted did not prevent the walls from becoming stained, nor the doors and windows from losing their neatness. On these occasions, Marta became exasperated at not being able to maintain the cleanliness and order she had championed all her life. She was a city woman, and her move to the countryside, not far from the highways that connected us to urban areas, increased the irritation that her health had already aggravated. We had been married for fourteen years, and in all that time we tried to have children, but only achieved four miscarriages and a new pregnancy, now apparently progressing normally. I clearly remembered each and every one of the failed attempts as I got out of the car and walked toward the house, observing on the stained walls, as if they were maps of my mind, the misshapen entities that could have been my children. The first time was shortly after we were married, and the pregnancy lasted only six weeks. There was disappointment and great sadness, but we were young then, and hope was greater than any other feeling. The second time, the pregnancy lasted until five months. The day of the abortion was the most terrible day either of us had faced in our lives up

to that point. Marta's face had contorted into a grimace of such pain that I thought I would lose her that very day. When she woke up in her bed the next morning, the dead fetus already removed and duly cremated by the health authorities, I observed the marks that would never disappear from my wife's expressions, no matter how much she laughed, no matter how happy she looked. They were the sign of the desperation that led us, very early on, to try new experiences, knowing they would almost certainly be frustrating, but that in some way they constituted challenges we needed to undertake. We looked for medical causes. We found nothing but the usual ones: sporadic hormonal disorders on her part, heart failure on my part. The doctor treating us never mentioned certain failure; genetics could beneficially alter the next attempt, but given previous experiences, he didn't recommend it. We, however, never spoke of the subject again. A year later, Marta became pregnant again. When she told me, I couldn't say anything. She put her hand over my mouth and asked me to be quiet. Four months later, another miscarriage followed.

I entered the house and was greeted by our dog, with a wagging tail and a couple of tired barks. He was old and barely jumped anymore; his long hair was in matted clumps that dragged on the floor. Marta no longer dedicated the time she had in the past, so the old dog hid under tables or armchairs, not even demanding to be fed if we didn't remember to. I went upstairs, thinking about her. What was she doing, I wondered. In recent months, she had been bedridden almost constantly. I had reached eight months of pregnancy, and more than joy, we both felt stupor. Every step on the stairs was like looking at the pictures of each of the frustrated children on the walls. I reached the last step, where I imagined the photos of the fourth abortion. We had let seven years pass since the last attempt, and this time it was like conceiving a virgin hope. Marta seemed happy, barely mentioning her previous pregnancies, and only as useful knowledge that served to avoid new mistakes. It was only four weeks, a month that turned out to be a lake of peace, a haven like a summer sky, clear, without wind or clouds, without shadows or fears. That invented summer disappeared one day with the usual bloodstains on the sheets, one morning when Marta almost tried to kill herself.

Three years passed since then. And I don't know how, but she returned from those sad depths into which she sank after the abortions, and which I was unable to penetrate, only to see the outward signs of her feelings. I had stopped getting angry at these changes I perceived. Irrational thoughts. Marta emerged again, beautiful again, after a while.

I entered the room. She was lying on the unmade bed. The window was closed and the nightstand light was on. There was a handheld computer resting on her stomach. I approached and kissed her on the lips. She didn't wake up, or at least pretended to be asleep. I saw she was looking for things to buy for the baby. All this time, I had put off the preparations, of course. We didn't even have a designated room where our son would sleep. Only the first one had been favored with the room we later dismantled and used as a library. Marta opened her eyes.

"Good morning, my love," she said.

I lay down next to her.

"You slept all night dressed..."

"I fell asleep. This whole choosing things for the baby tires me out, it's not my thing." You'll have to choose them yourself...

"Okay, but don't tell me anything afterward if you don't like them."

"You know I'll like them."

She looked at the calendar on the computer. She marked it. One more day, we thought together, one more day to be afraid. One couldn't get rid of it, ever.

I undressed and went to bed to sleep for a few hours. In the afternoon I had to go to the headquarters for a meeting about the deaths. Marta got up, turned off the light, covered me with the blanket, and left the room. I heard her slowly come down the steps, speaking tenderly to our dog. She would prepare something for lunch, then sit in the park, if the weather cleared, to look at the trees on the sides of the road, to contemplate, through the fog, the shapes of the nearest city. I knew she was thinking about the machines, too. We had often thought about having her admitted to the hospital to treat whatever was preventing her from carrying her pregnancies to term. But during each of the checkups and ultrasounds, nothing abnormal was ever found, so we weren't allowed inside. In the intervening periods, we also considered the possibility, but she was organically healthy, and I was afraid to allow her in. Back then, the death rate was very low, but I was aware of the irreversible nature of that process. I remembered my mother's experience there, and I didn't want Marta to go through the same thing, whatever it was.

In my dreams, I heard the dog barking, and two cars sped by on the road. The wind howled in the distance, and I imagined the light, steady rain on the people queued at the machines, with or without raincoats, with or without umbrellas. Their hair was wet, their shoes soaked and muddy, trembling. I dreamed of them filing in, in the darkness, a long line that seemed to have no end along the routes, forming nets around the machines, meshes that progressively closed in, until they were enclosed in an indistinguishable mass of men and women, climbing and fighting, looking for entry points. And the machines, now finally open, collapsed like collapsing buildings, like sidereal black holes leading to nowhere. Then, in a twilight dream, I thought I saw the plans my ancestors had designed. They were like mechanical engineering structures, with pulleys, conveyor belts, and cogwheels. The entire system constituted an anatomical rather than physiological framework, so ancient that it didn't even involve twentieth-century cybernetic knowledge. When I woke up, I told myself this wasn't possible.

Then I got up, ready to discuss the matter at that afternoon's assembly. I took a bath and dressed. Marta had already returned to bed.

"I left the food ready for you, dear."

"Thank you, love."

I wouldn't tell him I wasn't hungry; I'd go downstairs for a couple of bites and then head out as quickly as possible. It was late, and I'd fallen asleep in a half-sleep where sleep had troubled me more than I cared to admit. Old plans I'd never seen wandered through my head, yet I imagined them with a clarity that frightened me. Our bodies are machines, I began to ask myself, but what makes them work, what is their fuel? Is the soul, perhaps, an energy that no one has been able to determine, much less capture?

As I drove to the station, I searched for files on the car's computer. Millions of references appeared for the word "machines." None, however, mentioned their origins. I thought about focusing my search on medical topics, and yet references to metaphysical themes appeared. There was talk of Hippocrates, Cicero, Aristotle, Lucian of Samosata. I moved on to more recent references, but the names of Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas came up. Brief references to nineteenth-century poets caught my attention, two paragraphs by Anton Chekhov, and poems by Emily Dickinson. I put the speaker on, listening to it all while watching the route unfold like an intertwined path. An endless stream that led everything known to the past. And all of that seemed to me like an irreparable loss, as untraceable as our children gone forever. Knowledge was like them, legacies that could be left to the world to persist. But the words I heard now seemed to come from distant places, unearthed and echo-less, like corpses. I even smelled the dead animals on the road as I perceived the phrase of the American poet: "Thomas's faith in anatomy is greater than his faith in faith."

If a saint, I wondered, believed in the strength and persistence of the human body, then weren't machines just that: mechanical bodies that sooner or later would rust along the roads? But perhaps the saint and the poet weren't referring to that, but to the knowledge of anatomy as a discipline in itself. Not as an entity, but as an instrument. And every instrument has the limits of its function. Therefore, I tried to convince myself that there was no god in machines, as I had thought that morning, unless God was also a machine exposed to a more distant, but ultimately predictable, extinction.

The power station was packed with staff members. The machines had been left in the hands of the usual replacements. I entered the large gallery of the building, built two kilometers from the city. I heard the roar of hundreds of men's voices conversing before entering the main hall. The echo reverberated off the walls; the light of the now-clear afternoon entered through the glass ceilings.

Each person who arrived was given a receiver through which they would receive instructions during the assembly. I greeted many acquaintances I hadn't seen for a long time, most of them classmates at the academy. Drinks and hors d'oeuvres were served to liven up the wait. Almost an hour later, we were called into the hall. I had rarely seen him because such meetings were held sporadically. He was very tall, or at least that's what the mirrors and glass that formed the walls and ceiling made it seem. In the back, if that's what you could call the area opposite the main entrance

in a space shaped like an irregular parallelogram, sat the health system authorities.

We didn't sit down; the room wasn't designed for that. They began calling those who had filed complaints about the malfunction. My colleagues seemed worried when they returned after giving their statements. They called me, and I walked through the rows of men to the top manager. They politely sat me down. They asked for my first and last name, and my social security number. Then they asked for the number of deaths recorded by the machine I was in charge of, the exact percentage, and the period in which they occurred. I offered my information, and they thanked me for my cooperation.

I remained seated. They watched me. "You can go," they ordered. I didn't move. I thought of my ancestors, and a common thread of history united me intimately to them for a moment. Not only because of the inherited knowledge, now almost useless and barely perceptible to me, but because of a concrete fact that only now became clear to me: my heart was beating rapidly and unevenly. I knew that my father and grandparents had died of heart disease, and that united us in this moment.

"Gentlemen, with all due respect. As the person in charge of the machine, I would like to have the ability to fix its malfunctions to prevent the recorded deaths."

The chief in charge of the interrogation looked at the others and then at me.

"You were taught certain rules when you received your work permit; they will not be repeated here."

"I know, sir, but I dare remind you that only by knowing how the machines work will I be able to fix their defects."

"It is not your duty..."

"But we are the only ones who can do it. If you can teach us that."

The chief looked at me, bewildered.

"You're the grandson of one of the founders, aren't you?"

"That's right, sir."

For a moment, I realized he didn't dare fire me. He just repeated the usual argument.

"You're a data accountant, nothing more."

"Then I dare ask, how will we fix the machines?"

"They're programmed to repair themselves."

"That's nothing new."

"What I'm asking, sir, is to understand how they work, to prevent the deaths they're causing, and then prevent their dismissal."

They lowered their gaze, and a murmur of those present grew in the room.

No one knew how the machines worked.

Then they told me:

"They know."

They didn't speak to me again. The silence was so profound that I thought I could even hear the machines' motors running many miles away. I stood up with a growing thought: if they can't repair themselves, it's becauseThey don't know, just as I don't know how my body works. My heart was racing, and I didn't know why. My children were dying in my wife's womb, and we didn't know why. Where to look, I asked myself, how to learn. Where were the archives of my ancestors? The only thing I knew for sure was that they were gone forever.

I got in the car and thought about my mother. Perhaps, I wondered, I could find some memory in her lost mind. Sometimes, sick minds like hers lower the repressive barriers of moral conscience, and one can glimpse memories and ideas that one had thought unrecoverable.

I programmed the car for the trip to Mom's house. She lived in the city, on the sixtieth floor of a skyscraper hidden in the fog above. I announced myself over the intercom, and the woman who looked after her answered.

"Good afternoon, Samuel." It's been so long since we've seen you around here: How is Marta?

"Fine, thank you. How's Mom?"

"Same as always, sometimes more lucid, sometimes worse.

Today she was more awake," she told me when we entered the room. Mom was sitting in her wheelchair, facing the window, staring into the emptiness beyond. I kissed her on the cheek, she looked at me and smiled. She stroked my face and gestured for me to sit down on the bed.

"How are you, dear?" she asked.

I was pleased to see her so lucid; she had a consciousness in her eyes that I hadn't seen in her for years. That thought scared me.

"Fine, Mom. I came to ask you something I've been thinking about for a few days."

She waited with childish curiosity in her eyes.

"Did Dad ever tell you how machines work?"

She stared at me for a while. I was about to give up when he replied:

"Your father put more than just his mind into those machines, actually an invention of your grandfather, who collaborated with many others as well."

I waited for him to continue.

"But did they leave any records of their operation?"

"They were lost, I don't know... they argued many times over the patent for the invention... there were lawsuits that ruined us. Even in your father's time, they gave up going to court. That's when the deaths in the machines began. They weren't supposed to happen, everyone should be cured and live."

"Did Dad explain anything to you about why it happened?"

"He didn't talk about it at home; he wanted to protect us, that's why he never took you to the machines when you got sick. He cured you. Your father was a doctor; your grandfather, an engineer."

"I know, Mom... but are you sure they didn't leave any records at home?"

"Your father died one summer morning while he was typing some notes on the computer." That computer was taken by the Minister of Health.

I knew the ministry had been in the hands of the same family for more than a generation. The old minister, Farías, had developed the questions for the academy exams, and they were practically the same ones asked in the assemblies for all those years. Therefore, the files must have been destroyed or stored in a corner for so long that they must have been useless by now.

I thought about the long line of people that must be accumulating at the entrance to the computer I was in charge of, and that, with increasing probability, wouldn't leave. How could I get into the ministry and look for the files? This was what I was thinking as I said goodbye to my mother, took the elevator down the sixty floors, and got in the car on the way home. I had to devise a plan to find those files whose real existence I didn't even know existed. Shortly after starting the car, I received a call from Marta. My heart raced with a feeling common during those times when she was pregnant. Eight months had passed, and I was about to enter the ninth. It was the longest pregnancy I'd ever had, and it was very likely we'd finally have the child we'd been waiting for for fourteen years.

I answered the call.

"Samuel, darling, I need you. The baby is about to be born."

She sounded calm, and I heard in her voice not desperation, but an uncertain tone of...joy, perhaps. All I said was:

"I'm going there."

There was still a month to go, but I was sure the child would survive that long in an incubator.

When I arrived, I ran upstairs, and in the room I found Marta's doctor and a nurse at the foot of the bed. Agitated, I didn't need to ask.

"It's a boy."

My face must have betrayed frenzy, because soon the nurse blocked my way to the bed and pointed at the doctor.

"What's wrong?"

"There's a problem, Samuel."

I tried to get to Marta's bed, and even though the nurse got in the way, I saw her asleep. The baby wasn't there.

"Is he dead?" I asked.

"No, they're both alive, but your son has a problem. We couldn't detect it with the previous tests, neither with ultrasounds nor with placental studies."

I waited. There was no point in rushing. It wasn't something that entirely surprised me, but it did dash the high hopes I'd had over the past few months.

"He has a malformation. Since it's a skin defect, we couldn't detect it with the ultrasounds. Perhaps it even developed in the last few weeks due to something unknown."

I tried to understand what the doctor was explaining, but I couldn't. He took me by the arm and led me to the next room, where my son was. We went in. He was sleeping in a portable incubator. I leaned closer and saw that the baby had no skin. He was a tiny body made of muscle and tendons, even the most superficial bones were visible. I didn't cover my face or cry.

"How long will they keep him in the incubator?" I asked, still staring at that defenseless creature that was my son.

I was waiting for them to tell me how long it would take for the skin to form, but I already knew the answer.

"Until I die," I answered myself aloud, under the disturbed gaze of the doctor, who had perhaps never seen a case like this in his entire life.

Then I knew, with absolute certainty, that I would no longer sit and wait. From now on, I would no longer be a servant of the machines, but someone of no less courage than those hundreds waiting in line outside the doors. I, too, would enter with the child in my arms, to search, to question, to loudly and forcefully demand that my son be restored to health.

3

I believe that same night, I was admitted to the hospital because I had a heart failure. The old insufficiency that had been passed from my grandfather to my father, and from him to me, manifested itself several times throughout my life, but there were such long periods without symptoms that sometimes I didn't remember to take medication for certain situations. But how could I have known what would happen to César, because that was the name Marta and I decided to give him? The reason for such a choice was obvious: Caesar was the first to be born, and therefore, the first to triumph over the adversity that had befallen him. We were determined that he would be better than us, that his intelligence

would be capable of changing the world's failings. When we thought about this, alone in bed, watching Marta's growing belly, we laughed at our own disbelief, and also at that kind of hidden malice that unwittingly lay beneath our intentions. All that responsibility was too much for an unborn child, and too much for a man who would be no different from us or those around us. So we fell silent in the middle of the night, previously filled with laughter and hope, and silently hoped that at least he would be born, and that he would be healthy.

I woke up in the city hospital, where Marta's doctor worked. I felt sedated and drowsy. I hated this state of consciousness; I felt exposed to the arbitrary will of others, with a complete lack of control over my actions and my life. But I resigned myself to waiting for the medication to wear off. By the afternoon, I told the doctor I wanted to leave.

"But promise me you'll take your medication for the whole week. You have a valve insufficiency that could cause you grief..."

I closed my ears to the words the doctors said almost without thinking, because they aren't talking to a person, but to a sick heart, a broken bone, or a dyspeptic stomach. I promised to take care of myself, they discharged me, and I returned home.

My son was still in the incubator, under the care of a nurse we hired. Marta was in bed, sedated and also monitored by the nurse, and our doctor came once a day to check on her. By the end of the first week, she was awake and lucid, but she had little desire to speak to me or anyone else. She limited herself to eating what we brought to her room. He didn't even want to go to the bathroom, and I had to change his clothes and sheets several times a day.

"Marta," I would say to her affectionately, as if that would be enough to make her react, to let her know that what awaited her was something better than that vegetative state that benefited no one. She certainly knew it, and that's why she continued like that.

I took a two-week leave of absence from work because it was imperative to do something with César. I sat in a chair next to the incubator, in the middle of the room I had prepared for him. He was, without a doubt, a specimen in a medical science museum. And I, by chance his father, watched him closely, guarding him, and trying to understand the functioning of that strange body, pure muscles, tendons, and bones. He moved like a snake, coiling his limbs, or at least that's how it seemed to me, seeing the intertwined muscles of his arms and legs. When she cried, the muscles of her face and neck would flex and flex with impulses that at first seemed grotesque to me. But as the days went by, these movements seemed to me theThe minutely controlled gears of a machine, perhaps a clock, perhaps the most exact machines ever invented by men. What more exact could be achieved to measure the passage of time, because in the end, who could know the true rhythm of time? A clock is only the precision of a measure invented by man, but even so, it had to make up for the lack of true knowledge of God. Time had to be a substitute god, and perhaps

crueler than the true one, and clocks were continuous machines that watched over men.

My son's body had to possess such precision. If no one wanted to teach me how my body worked, if even doctors had forgotten physiology to dedicate their immense universities to teaching only technological protocols, if machines were the only thing left to us to recover our health, and they failed, then the profound knowledge that the human brain had once acquired was of no use.

What was in the machines was inaccessible. Therefore, I had to turn to my own body for knowledge.

I left the room, went downstairs, and entered the kitchen. Without thinking, I opened the cutlery drawers. I rummaged through the knives looking for the one I used to fillet fish. I found it and carried it back upstairs with me. The house was midday, but exceptionally quiet, so much so that it seemed empty. Marta was sleeping, the child was silent for a few hours, the nurse perhaps dozing next to my wife.

I went into the bathroom and locked the door. I looked at myself in the mirror, touched the bones of my face, and stretched the skin of my body as if it were the first time I had seen and touched it. I stripped completely naked, exploring the most suitable place, the one I could think of that would reveal the most machine-like structures. Because I already knew, with a certainty no one could take away from me, that if machines knew how to heal, or at least had known until recently, it was because they were like human bodies, and the happy congruences between human mechanics and physiological mechanics had participated in their creation. If I found the similarities, I would have taken the first step toward understanding how they worked. And when I knew what was wrong, I would fix the mechanism to cure my son. If only my grandfather or my father had left texts, archives, notebooks at least. But in the face of so much knowledge lost forever, there was the wealth of my own knowledge, locked inside my body, awaiting the action of my hands, eager to know themselves.

Remembering my son's muscular movement, which at that moment seemed more perfect than that of all living men, because his very decrepitude exposed him as a model of what we truly are, I thought about lifting my own skin. If I managed to do it and experiment with my voluntary movements, something I couldn't ask César to do, I would learn much more than I had already discovered. Before placing the edge of the knife against the skin of my left arm, I thought about pain, that human weakness that would prevent me from continuing and achieving results. I returned to the hallway and went to Marta's room. The nurse was still asleep. I took ampoules of lidocaine from her medicine cabinet, along with a syringe and a needle. I injected three of them into my arm, until it felt so numb that I decided I shouldn't wait any longer.

I cut the skin of my left forearm to the exact point where the tendons passed. I contemplated the easily expandable membrane that covers the muscles beneath the skin. I saw, entranced, the paths of the blood vessels. I moved my fingers, and the tendons moved like pulley ropes that continued

to my elbow and shoulder. The blood flowed, but it didn't matter. I put my arm under the running tap and touched the workings of my body again with the fingers of my other hand. Then, I covered my arm with a towel. I refilled the syringe with anesthetic and injected it into my stomach. I felt my heart racing for several minutes, and faintness stopped me more than once, but I couldn't stop what I was doing. I opened the skin of my abdomen several centimeters, put my hand into the fatty tissue, exploring, until I felt the muscles, beyond which lay the viscera. Would I continue, I wondered, until the pain overcame me? But I didn't have time to ask myself any more questions; my brain raced with its thoughts and stumbled over its clumsiness. I looked at myself in the mirror. My face was pale, sweaty, my left arm hanging in flaps of skin and limp fingers, my right hand bloodied like a murderer's, and my stomach opened down the middle with fat and blood. I thought to myself, that I wouldn't be able to resist. Should I explore it too? But then what would become of my son, and why would I have done all that?

I'm sure, though, that I wouldn't have been able to stop myself. The minutely controlled gears of a machine, perhaps a clock, perhaps the most exact machines ever invented by men. What more exact could be achieved to measure the passage of time, because in the end, who could know the true rhythm of time? A clock is only the precision of a measure invented by man, but even so, it had to make up for the lack of true knowledge of God. Time had to be a substitute god, and perhaps crueler than the true one, and clocks were continuous machines that watched over men.

My son's body had to possess such precision. If no one wanted to teach me how my body worked, if even doctors had forgotten physiology to dedicate their immense universities to teaching only technological protocols, if machines were the only thing left to us to recover our health, and they failed, then the profound knowledge that the human brain had once acquired was of no use.

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The bright morning found me in the car on my way to the hospital. They already knew me, so I went straight up to the neonatal ward, and in the long row of old incubators, I easily found my son. I dressed in sterile gowns and gloves. They allowed me to hold him. That delicate, naked little body, doubly naked, as if I saw its soul in those exposed muscles and tendons, shuddered at my touch. I began walking through the hallways between the incubators, as if strolling, as if rocking my baby in my arms to lull him to sleep. I reached the door of the ward; there was no one in the hallway. Then I ran down the stairs and through the front door while the few who

were there stared at me like I was crazy. I got into the car as quickly as I could and fled. I knew they would chase me, but not for long. They would soon notify the authorities, but by the time they found me, everything would be over. I planned the route to one of the more distant machines, in another district. No one would suspect I'd take my son to the machines, and the psychologist would think I'd kill him, perhaps, or they'd search my house first.

In the car, the boy writhed in my arms, agitated at first, then the faint hum of the engine lulled him to sleep. His eyes looked like two dark lakes in the middle of a face formed by concentric circles of muscles surrounding the eye sockets, cheekbones, and jaw. His mouth occasionally opened to emit a cry that soon died away. His nostrils were absent, and bare bones formed the nostrils. His skull was like a red blanket of stretch marks. I'd heard doctors say that the surface of the body should always be kept moist. I took a bottle of water out of the glove compartment and soaked the sheets I'd used to take him from the hospital. When we reached the machine, the car stopped near the door. I picked up the child and got in line. There were maybe twenty or twenty-five people in front of me. I looked toward the command booth. The attendant was doing his job, as I had been, glancing down the line from time to time, but I knew he'd soon tire and limit himself to watching everything on the monitors.

I was just one of them, for the first time, with no connection to the healthcare system or the machines. I felt different in that line, exposed to the sun's rays while I waited impatiently. The others watched me, I think with some curiosity. My clothes were more carefully maintained than the others', and they were only convinced I was one of them when they saw my scars.

"Are you here to have them treated?" an old man behind me asked.

I shook my head and pointed at the child in my arms. The man slightly lifted the cloth covering César's head and stepped back. Then he shook his head with sadness and resignation.

"I hope they cure him," he said, then looked at the woman accompanying him to whisper something in her ear. Soon everyone turned to look at me. Some asked questions, others simply timidly asked to see my son. I knew that all this movement would attract the attention of the person in charge, and I feared being recognized at some point. Perhaps he had seen me at a meeting without me paying attention.

The machine stood as it did now, like an enormous ancient monument in the middle of nowhere in that countryside so far from the rest of the cities. Those of us waiting at the entrance had no way of seeing those leaving on the other side, if they were leaving at all. I also didn't know the statistics or the death rate of that device. In reality, I didn't know what I was going to do when I entered. I hoped the machine would cure the boy, that through some method unknown to me, it would regenerate his skin. But I also knew that with what I had learned, I could somehow unravel the defect, if it ever occurred. And above all, I grew curious to learn about that deux ex machina that my ancestors had placed at the vital center of the machines.

Evening arrived, and there were ten people left before my turn. A sharp, stinging drizzle began. I tried to cover the baby, and a woman at the end of the line approached to offer me a rain cover.

"Thank you," I said, but the woman suddenly began shouting toward the monitoring cameras, demanding to be put on the next shift. I asked her to stop, but she continued shouting, her hands raised toward the unreachable camera. A few seconds later, other people in the line joined in, and the movement became conspicuous and uncontrollable. If any riot or act of violence occurred, the attendant was authorized to call security forces, and the machine would automatically shut down. My heart rate accelerated, and I felt faint; the machine seemed to collapse on me, and I no longer had any strength in my arms. Then someone held me, and I found myself directlyI stood in front of the entrance door, which opened for me for the first time. I took the crucial step, and the world suddenly disappeared.

It was just my son and me, facing the moving belt, which turned and turned in the void. If I placed César on the belt, I would never know what would happen, so I got on with him, and I let myself be transported for what seemed like long meters of narrow, dark corridors that I never imagined could exist inside the machine. From the outside, they looked enormous, but now inside, the darkness gave me the illusion of a much larger place, like a labyrinth with multiple entrances and exits, but all sealed off, because the belt went from one side to the other, exposing us to fast, sudden lights that revealed nothing but empty spaces and endless high ceilings. Then we were drenched in chemical substances that I recognized as sulfur, phosphorus, calcium, and others I couldn't identify. I smelled strange, acrid aromas, and a rotten smell began to waft from the sides of the conveyor belt. I stretched out an arm to gauge the proximity of the walls, but all I felt was thick, fetid-smelling air. Then the conveyor belt stopped, and I heard a rumble of chains descending from the ceiling. I could see them above us, with hooks capable of holding cattle ready for slaughter. I undid the hooks, and the conveyor belt continued on its way. Through the flickering of fluorescent lights, I saw cogwheels turning over each other in a mechanism resembling a giant clock. These pulleys were moving many more chains like the ones that had previously been meant to hold us, but all this was happening far above us, and also around us.

We reached a section where the mechanical elements gave way to a seemingly computerized room, the walls filled with lights and digital screens where I recognized some of the parameters we were supposed to recognize in the cockpit. I assumed we'd arrived near the exit door, but there I was holding my son, just as I had entered. I don't know what I expected, and I felt like a deluded, superstitious fool. But that's when the machine took us to what I later learned was its true center.

The conveyor belt stopped, and I got off. The smell of decay was more evident, so much so that I began to feel nauseous. At the back of that new room, out of the impenetrable darkness, two human hands appeared, but with a synthetic appearance. So perfect, they were like the hands of the most beautiful god invented by men. Hands that had arms and a body behind them, yet couldn't be seen in the darkness.

I tried to step back, but one of the hands held me by the injured arm, and I almost dropped Caesar. The other hand caught the child before he fell, and suddenly I was no longer holding him. I made a gesture to retrieve it, but a palm rested on my chest, and I felt my heart in that hand—or was it actually one of those hands?

I don't know how many minutes passed, trying to retrieve the child while feeling the air around me, but Caesar was already in those hands that had taken him to the deep darkness that smelled of dead bodies. When I finally sensed what lay in that hidden depths of the machine, I screamed and thrashed, and let the god's mechanical hand tear at my skin, until I felt my ribs break and my heart disappear from my body, leaving a void warmer than pain, a relief so similar to pleasure and peace that I told myself this was death.

With my last glances, I observed the infinite contents of the machine's depths. Rows and rows, columns, countless kilometers of human bodies. And all those bodies emitted a strange light, a fluorescence that was a form of energy that generated thoughts and recreated human forms.

I had reached the brain of the machines, and I saw that that brain had decided and acted based on what it had observed I had done for my son. I saw those hands return and place the child on the conveyor belt once more. A child who was the same and yet different, for he had a new skin covering his body.

And as I disappeared into the convolutions of the great brain of the new god, the exit door opened, and a vital cry filled the world.

EUROPE

1

He fed on death for a time, for that was what he did while his work in the cemetery of Earth's moon lasted. Now he was leaving behind the vast craters where humans who had paid their entire lives for a place on the moon were laid to rest forever. The ship was transporting Jeremiah and hundreds of other unemployed workers beyond Earth's orbit. He could see through the porthole the ghostly shadow of the planet Earth, which had been dying for more than two centuries. And the moon was not only a refuge for what remained of the human population, but also a place where extravagance also survived. ia. Because how else could one describe the need to build enormous private cemeteries in the only place in the solar system where it was long believed humans could settle? On the planet, there were uninhabitable regions, inhospitable due to aridity or ice, entire continents devastated by constant hurricanes, and others lost under the advancing oceans.

He thought of Europe, where his ancestors came from, Central and Eastern Europe. The ancient Poles and Slavs who made up the two branches of his family for generations, inhabitants of cultivated fields and cities where

death and music formed a chain with links of joy and sadness. And just as they had emigrated to America, now also poisoned by deadly gases, where the surviving cities covered themselves with domes to protect themselves from the contaminated atmosphere, he, Jeremiah, was now a kind of pariah traveling from one place to another, from one habitable planet or satellite to another, outside or inside, if possible, the busiest commercial circuits. But he needed to go unnoticed because at every border he was reminded of his status as an outcast, a wandering vagabond. He was also reminded of his race, because the centuries had only maintained, if not increased, the collective opinion about those who had rejected Christ. Where was the Messiah? he asked himself in his cramped space inside the ship, contemplating the active universe through the narrow porthole. The Earth was disappearing beneath them, receding like a dead planet, as they traveled toward their next destination: Europe.

For twenty-two years he had been wandering through the solar system. He had witnessed the birth of colonies that became cities, others that died in the dust or under the sway of the wind or the tides. He was a digger in the tin mines on Mars for almost five years, and when he began to lose his sight, they waited for him to recover so they could use him to transport coal from the mines of Phobos to Earth. After each visit to this planet, he came away more saddened, with the memory that accompanied him of the inhabitants hiding in tunnels like animals, awaiting the arrival of coal like an elixir. He collected his pay in the rich lands of Mars, now converted into a garden, where the mansions of the mine owners alternated with vast acres of crops and livestock. They offered him work there, and he was a farmer for a long time, and then a herder of hybrid livestock that hardly resembled those of old Earth. In payment, they gave him a very low wage, a house, and food. The meat of that cattle began to affect his renal system, and he nearly died from retaining water, which was no longer Earth water, of course. The high helium content gave him a taste that would have been difficult to tolerate if not for the flavorings extracted and processed by the ships from Mercury's atmosphere. On Mars, humans had begun to change, and Jeremiah, like many other travelers, still maintained his body under the old Earthly canons.

For part of the last ten years, he worked for a tourism company that took contingents to the rings of Saturn. He piloted the ship on countless trips, reciting the scientific characteristics of the rings, as well as the human details during the long years of research and expeditions. In a way, he felt like a spokesperson for the old human race, like in the ancient tales where an old Jewish man with a long beard read, between coughs and clearing his throat, the true, sometimes unintelligible deeds of the prophets. Jeremiah knew the tourists were looking at him curiously, shifting their gaze from the astonishing rings to contemplate this man, somehow out of step with time. Dressed in old-fashioned clothes, he undoubtedly made them feel like they were in the presence of a myth, and even if it wasn't deliberate, it was another reason for his success in such an endeavor. They also looked to his ability to steer the ship single-handed, and whatever mistrust had sown was soon dispelled by Jeremiah's restless, wise voice. In his eyes, there was

a spark of the past; in his short beard, his words were tinged with the forever-lost flavor of funeral flowers.

In the lunar cemeteries, he carried bodies in the ships' large storage rooms, and that silence saddened him, because there was no longer any point in speaking, or even thinking. He came and went from the moon to Earth or any other place where a human had died, leaving a record of his wish to be buried as close to the planet of his birth as possible. He would land and lower the coffins onto the conveyor belt, which the gravediggers would then take to the lunar valleys filled with crosses, and not a single cross of David could be found for thousands of miles around. It was the only andA job in which he was assured of job security until the end of his life, when he, too, would be taken to the moon, to be buried in a peripheral crater, of lesser value, without a cross, of course, and perhaps even without any markings. But what he couldn't bear any longer was the silence of the ship during the voyage. There was a time when the stump of his right arm began to tremble, sending shivers through his body. At the end of the day, he undressed in his cabin, because the ship was his home, and cleaned the drainage from his fistula. He wondered why, after so many years, this was happening to him. He let it go for several months. The silence grew on the voyages, because he knew that the dead in the morgue were a presence rather than an absence, and silence was something negative rather than something neutral. It was as if, it occurred to him, his absent arm were being called. And when such a thought began to take hold in his mind, he knew he had to abandon that job, because Jeremías was proud of his self-conscious psychological balance. He knew that the mind controls the body; he had confirmed it more than twenty years earlier, when he was separated from his Siamese twin brother.

His family lived in Santa María de los Buenos Ayres, a South American city founded for the tenth time exactly the year they were born. It had been built far to the west of its original location, on the banks of a river that had now disappeared beneath the sea. The city was surrounded by torrid arid regions, still far from the high mountains from which torrential rains regularly fell and flooded the streets for months. Jeremías and his brother had been born with a single torso; they shared a single heart and three lungs. Their shared body was indistinguishable from their shoulders, of which there were only two, to their waists, where two barely developed pelvises differentiated them. Beneath them, they were two different people, as were their necks and heads. Jeremías often wondered how they managed to endure such a situation for fifteen years. His parents had wanted to separate them from birth, but doctors had told them that even the greatest advances in surgical or technological science would not allow both brothers to survive. One was undoubtedly going to die; the other's chances of survival, in the short term, were also very low. His father sometimes spent nights watching them in their shared bed because they had trouble sleeping as children. As they grew older, the forced coexistence became more difficult for them. Habit had indoctrinated them, disciplined them in daily tasks and physiological needs, and somehow they were happy for many years. His parents deceived themselves with the apparent dream of happiness, which turned out to be nothing more than conformity. There

were other things to think about in those times, work, for example, and the increasingly terrible climate that dominated the young and old city of Buenos Aires.

It was then, when they turned thirteen, that Jeremías began to feel something was suffocating him. He woke up during the night agitated, gasping for air, and his brother would wake up with him, looking scared, but with no sign of sharing the same feeling.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Then Jeremías knew it wasn't an ailment of his body, but of his mind. That's how he began to differentiate and put aside what his parents had instilled in them since they were children: they weren't one person, they were two. What he felt and thought, his brother didn't necessarily share; he might even feel something completely opposite.

After several months, when the same question was repeated and his brother's face showed weariness and contempt, he stated without a doubt:

"We must separate."

The other looked at him contemplatively, as if instead of a familiar face he was seeing a strange landscape, one he was afraid to enter.

"Since when have you been thinking about that?"

Jeremías laughed despite himself; he knew the situation didn't warrant it.

"I think I've been thinking about it forever."

"And why didn't you tell me?"

He hated that habit of always answering him with questions.

"I don't know, because we're used to living this way, because Mom and Dad love us that way, because I didn't know how to tell you..."

They were silent for a long time, both staring up at the ceiling, leaning on the long pillow. One's arm was behind his head, the other's on his genitals. One's legs were bent, the other's extended, trembling slightly under the sheets.

"It's cold," Jeremiah said, reaching for a blanket, forcing the other to move and hitting his head on the back of the bed. Jeremiah apologized. He should have warned him; it was one of the many rules they had both learned to respect over the years. They had fought a lot, hitting each other with each arm, but they never knew whose brain responded to that arm, and after a few minutes they would end up laughing at the ridiculous choreography of the fight. Even their parents, who came running to stop them, were the first to laugh, which made them reconcile.

"If it's because of what's happening to us, we'll work it out, like everything else," said his brother.

Jeremiah knew what he was talking about. The growing anxiety caused by sex had caused both of them to wake up in the middle of the night watching

one or the other jerk frantically. They had exchanged few words, not out of embarrassment but out of intimate mutual understanding.

"It's not just that, although it's true that I've thought about what we'll do when it's our turn to be with a woman."

"Maybe with two," said his brother, with a smile on his face. "We'll ask Dad."

Jeremiah nodded. He didn't want to talk anymore, but from then on, he felt the other's gaze day and night, and he mistook every gesture and glance for a constant reproach and interrogation.

He spoke to his mother first, wanting to warn her. She cried, saying she understood. The next day, his father and mother entered their children's room.

"Do you want to separate?" asked his father.

The brothers looked down at the sheets. It was early evening, and the thunder in the mountains echoed ominously.

"Yes," Jeremiah replied, for both of them.

The parents looked at each other.

"You know it's not possible," said the father. "And you know why. The decision has been made, and there's no more talk."

He took his wife's arm and they began to leave the room.

Jeremiah suddenly stood up and dragged his brother out of bed. The other screamed as he hit his head again, this time on the nightstand. Jeremiah stopped, and his father and mother approached. His brother had bled and was wiping himself with the sheet.

"What have I told you about periods?!" his father shouted. Mom comforted her brother, resting his injured head against her chest as if he were still a baby. Despite the fact that the body belonged to both of them, Jeremiah felt that hug had excluded him forever.

From then on, the brothers didn't speak to each other. Weeks passed, and his brother began to complain of a headache. He knew it was a reproach for that night, so at first he decided to ignore it, but then the constant moaning became unbearable. Jeremiah wondered how much his brother's hatred was such that he was forced to pretend like that. Or maybe he wasn't pretending, but this thought troubled him so much that it was unbearable to hold it in his mind for long without it hurting him.

They were taken to several hospitals, placed in large imaging machines, and subjected to diets that Jeremías had to endure while constantly complaining. His parents reproached him for his behavior, and his brother remained silent. The rare instance in which he looked at him directly showed that he knew what he was thinking, and what would happen.

They diagnosed him with a hematoma in a cerebral artery. Maybe or maybe not, it was the result of the blow—no one could say for sure—was the

doctors' response. Surgery was needed to drain the hematoma, which was potentially dangerous as a cause of embolisms. During the surgery, Jeremías listened to the doctors' conversation. A sheet separated their heads. He heard the sound of the saw trepanning the skull, the sound of the heart monitor with its regular rhythm. Meanwhile, he thought about how no one had ever shown as much compassion for him as they had for his brother. However, everyone knew that he too would die if a chance embolism lodged in the arteries of their shared heart. Hatred was like a clot that grew and hardened in his chest. Hating his brother wasn't right, but he hated like someone who can't help but feel it against the one who took his life.

A while later, he fell asleep from the effects of the anesthesia. When he woke up, he felt shaken all over. The bed was moving, catheters were being inserted into both arms. His brother's head was being shaken, and he felt the shaking in his own neck. He wanted to ask what was happening, but his tongue was dry and stuck to the roof of his mouth. He fell asleep again.

Then, who knows how long after, his parents were at his side—his brother, that is—and they were crying. The tall figure of the surgeon approached Jeremiah and asked:

"How are you?"

Jeremiah cried, not from grief, but from recognition.

"I'm in pain, and I feel weak."

The doctor glanced at the parents.

"You need to be operated on immediately; the gangrene is spreading."

He awaited their consent. They both nodded, and in the look they gave Jeremiah, he discovered what true resentment was, next to which hatred seemed a precarious and weak feeling.

When he was just him, when he was no longer just one, when there was no one else to talk to, No other legs to make him go somewhere he didn't want to go, when his body responded to its own unique desires. There was the absent arm that reminded him of all that. The positive because of the negative. The hubbub lost in the silence. The feelings exacerbated by the absence of all feeling.

And when he saw in the following days that his parents' gaze was directed at the arm he no longer had, which he never really had because it was his brother's arm, when he saw that they missed the thief more than his victim, but that they considered him the victim of the potential murderer they had raised, he no longer knew which of his sides had been positive and negative, which was hate and love, the victim and the perpetrator. Now he was guilt, intensified by the permanent absence, that entity that in itself is a whole, like nothingness, irreversible, incorruptible, and incorruptible. Because his brother's former presence was nothing now compared to his absence. An absent arm had more influence than the cruel and omniscient God his ancestors had believed in.

So he fled from his parents, from his home, and from the city, all that would soon die. And at first he began to wander the world, and when there was no longer a habitable place, he fled the world and entered the vaster silence of outer space, perhaps thus silencing the noisy silence of his inner space. And as he began to travel from world to world, he kept wondering what wisdom had inspired his parents to baptize their sons with those names: Ahasuerus and Jeremiah. As he learned later, the first was the name of a simple scarab beetle, the second the prophet who had tried to reconcile God with the ancient Jews, enduring the hatred of kings.

That baptism was apt, and in view of what happened later, he felt identified, believing he had reconciled his thought with the incongruity of reality. That's why, the first time he was asked his name upon crossing the first border after his self-imposed exile, he replied:

"Jeremiah."

And the much-vaunted psychological stability he later boasted about was always a fallacy.

2

The ship was now crossing the orbit of Mars. The great planet was slowly approaching, and looking through the porthole, he began to discover the areas where the war had already begun. For several months, the planet had honored the god with whose name it had been baptized. Jeremiah had thought, back in the days when he worked on the farms, that one day war would break out for the same reasons it had on Earth: to overthrow exploitation and social differences. Fragments of jammed news reached his earphones, while on the ship's screens, images of the war were presented on the newsreels. The surface of Mars was an arid desert, as it had been before the arrival of humans, after the explosion of three hydrogen bombs. The survivors were hidden in tunnels and canals; the landowners were probably still in nuclear shelters, from which they would emerge in ships they owned.

He decided to get some sleep; there was still a long way to go before he reached Europe. He closed his eyes and unplugged his headphones. Memories flowed into his mind, seemingly turning into small, voracious worms gnawing at the stump of his arm. A frequent tingling gave him such a sensation, and he told himself many times that something else was wrong with that wound that didn't seem to want to heal, although a large scar assured him there was nothing to fear. It wasn't a coincidence, he told himself, that just as he was leaving his job at the funeral home, he began to experience those symptoms in the stump. It was as if his missing arm knew when he had decided to resume the long, endless pilgrimage. Once he settled down somewhere, the symptoms disappeared, but then the restlessness would return, first as a growing despair, a tossing and turning all night, without pain, only with an indescribable anguish. Then came the sensation in his arm, and he would strip his torso and examine the wound,

searching for fistulas, secretions, or inflammation. But the stump spoke to him silently, sometimes with the muteness of insensitivity, other times with hyperalgesia at the slightest touch.

He had believed for a long time that his job at the funeral home would be definitive, because that feeling he always feared would appear was conspicuous by its absence. But the silence of the transport ship with its dead behind it was stronger than time and its healthy, inevitable passing. On the last day, which he had already unconsciously decided, he left the bodies on the surface of Earth's moon. The employees looked at him in astonishment, shocked at first, then fearful, so they took out their weapons, and while threatening him, they called thes authorities. They didn't understand why he had opened each of the coffins and removed each body, stripping them of the clothes their relatives had dressed them in for death. It wasn't a resignation, therefore, but a dismissal in which the company had to avoid legal action for fear of lawsuits from the relatives. Jeremiah's act was concealed by the slow and parsimonious repair of the damage. Each body was redressed and placed in its coffin. And while Jeremiah contemplated this work, temporarily imprisoned in the border office, the sun illuminated the Earth, which shone like a star of strange consciousness. While he suffered the pain of exile, his planet shone with new life, as if all the dead were shining, celebrating a great punishment. Then he knew that a new cycle had been fulfilled, and with that knowledge of dread, which was at the same time a sense of security to which he clung, he set off again. Exile was his norm, his destiny, even his sad happiness.

Later, he heard that a great deal of industrial activity had developed on Europa's moon. He inquired among his friends and former colleagues in the mines of Mars. That's how he learned there was an unoccupied factory on that moon of Jupiter. Apparently, it had gone bankrupt, and the original owners had abandoned it. Now it was under government care, but closed, awaiting sale or rental to anyone who wanted to put it into operation. Jeremiah told himself it was a different opportunity. He had never started a venture like that, and he had nothing to lose by trying. What would he manufacture? He'd see that later, depending on the machines and installations left in the facility. The screen announced Jupiter's proximity. He felt the ship beginning to suffer the effects of the planet's immense gravitation. No ship could get too close without the risk of being caught by the atmosphere and crashing into the planet's uninhabitable surface.

Europa, he read in the arrival announcements. How curious, he said in a very low voice. It was like returning to his family's origins. Although the Europe he was about to enter was very different from the one from which his ancestors had gone into exile, the similarity in their names was no coincidence; rather, some deliberate influence must have existed for him to take that path. Since his brother's death, and even more so since that night when they had first spoken seriously about their separation, he knew that everything he had done or would do since then was something he could not avoid. More than a destiny per se, his fate was the consequence of a fate that had taken on the dimensions appropriate to his guilt. His ancient race made this evident, as was evident in their songs filled with sorrow and

suffering, but whose sadness turned into joy simply because it was suffering. God should be thanked for the opportunity to experience pain.

The ship began to gravitate around the satellite. The descent was laborious and bumpy. Jeremiah saw the clouds disperse, and on the clear, sea-smooth surface, skyscrapers rose. It looked like old New York, but ten times larger, and beyond which stretched ten times more similar cities. When they landed, the passengers descended one by one, first passing through the decompression chambers. They had to replenish their oxygen supply, although the surface had been adapted to a percentage already completely suitable for humans. Upon exiting the chambers, Jeremiah found himself on Earth, facing the largest city he had ever been in. Earth was in ruins, and the Champs de Mars before the recent war were simply vast fields where humanity seemed to have attempted to imitate and duplicate the dimensions, the terrifying immensity, and height of the great, old cities of early Europe. Beyond the airport barriers, the tall buildings began, rising in various shapes one next to the other, with no streets in between, only bridges between each one, while small individual planes flew over the city from one terrace to another among the clouds. As he went inside on a conveyor belt that took him and his little luggage toward the hotel, he saw that in a clear area by the sea, dry and limpid beyond the city, there was something similar to the old London Bridge. The hotel they took him to had the name of the city: New London, but it was as if the already destroyed New York had been transferred to Europe. In the hotel lobby, he went to a satellite map. He looked for the factory area he should go to. It was two hundred kilometers from the city, surrounded by just as many cities with the names of New Rome, New Frankfurt, or New Paris. He approached the counter, where robots were coming and going, taking care of everything. Guests and their luggage.

"How long will you be staying, sir?" a man behind the counter asked, obsequiously smiling through his splendid steel teeth.

"One night. How can I get to factory area number 15?"

"A car will take you at a time you agree, sir."

"Then tomorrow at seven in the morning."

"Your ID, sir, if you please."

Jeremiah placed his left thumb down, and a name he didn't want to read appeared on the registration screen. He glanced at the clerk, who was smiling.

"Have a pleasant stay, sir."

Another robot grabbed his single piece of luggage and waited for him to follow it to the elevators. They climbed 230 floors to his room. When he was alone, he approached the window. Between the clouds that dispersed and reformed, he saw the buildings around him, beyond which, through a small gap, he saw the sea—not a sea, but a clear surface with large perforations that reached the oceans beneath the planet's surface. Much further away was the factory. From Earth's moon, he had handled

everything related to the ownership of that abandoned site. The European government had ceded it to him in exchange for a ridiculously low rent for those times. It must not have had many favorable prospects for progress.

The next morning, he awoke to the booming sound of the mechanical voice of the driver of the car that would take him to the factory. He opened his eyes and saw the face of the hotel concierge next to his bed.

"Sir, it's the driver's sixth call, it's seven hours and two minutes."

The robot's hand touched him affectionately on the right shoulder. Jeremiah stood up and said something under his breath. The concierge waited while he showered and dressed.

"Tell the driver I'll be down in five minutes."

The concierge left, and Jeremiah looked at himself in the mirror. His beard, already two weeks old, his tired eyes, his long hair, his old work clothes, which he'd kept because he didn't have anything more comfortable for traveling. His appearance contrasted sharply with the neatness of the robots in New London. But he told himself he looked the part for a future manufacturer on the outskirts of the city. A few minutes later, he left the hotel, and the car took the wide road that made the tall buildings disappear and entered the calm sea of sand and stone, between the drilling rigs. The sky over Europe was turquoise blue at its highest point, with reddish hues toward the horizon. The sun was weak, so the cold was intense everywhere on the satellite. The wind was noticeable in this solitary and vast region. He could hear the whirring of the wind outside the car, whipping it around, but the mechanic-driver was skilled and kept the course steady. Two hours passed, and even though they could have arrived much sooner, the car was moving slowly. Jeremías had time to think about his future, sitting in the back seat, his suitcase beside him, watching the lunar landscape pass by the windows, knowing, without feeling it, that the wind whipped the towers that extracted water, dragged the sand along the ground, and any element that dared to peek into those parts. He wondered what conditions were like in the factory region, but he barely had time to imagine it when they arrived at a large entrance with high walls on either side. The entrance arch reminded him of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, as he had seen it in old photographs. It seemed exaggerated, until he considered the importance of that area for the progress of Europe and several other satellites of Jupiter, because little by little, that area had been transformed into a large-scale production center, exporting its goods abroad, becoming a source of increasingly significant economic income. Perhaps, he told himself, his factory had a future, and he wouldn't need to leave again.

The car passed under the arch after stopping for the detectors to register it. The road continued for another half hour, but on the sides of the road, the immense factories rose like closed monasteries, or windowless cubes, almost geometric mountains, lifeless and lifeless in the face of the wind. The car stopped, and the driver announced the end of the trip. Jeremías paid the amount owed and got out. As the car drove off, he found himself alone in the middle of the road, amid the shadows of large, silent buildings. He consulted the records for the exact location of his factory. He calculated

the coordinates, looked around for any indication of names or distances. The building must be a hundred meters away. He began walking, protected from the wind by the almost unbroken walls of the old factories. One after another, of different heights and lengths, they were like a tangle of cubes arranged in a row. Why was there no one to guide him, he wondered, where were the workers, where were those in charge of handling the robots? It was so early in the morningtrack, and working hours would only end when daylight ceased. Finally, he found his factory. It was a brick mass, at least of a material that effectively imitated old bricks. The architect, or whoever had built it, had given it the appearance of one of the old twentieth-century factories on Earth. While its square shape was common to the others, it had a series of gabled roofs and chimneys that probably served only as decoration. Along the high walls, he saw rows of barred windows. The red color set it apart from the rest, casting a shadow over it while also distinguishing it, creating a sense of strangeness, a certain mystery that invited him to wonder what was manufactured inside. Before acquiring it, he had asked what the production had been like before it closed, but everyone avoided the question, saying it had been closed for years. It was one of the first factories opened in Europe, when that entire region was nothing more than a windswept desert. He looked for the front door and found it on the other side, with his back to the road. The gate was wrought iron, with two panels. On the sides and above the gate, an eave with its iron columns cast a thick, viscous shadow. There was an inscription on the gate that he couldn't read in the darkness. Initials, or a Latin legend, probably. The original owners must have been the first settlers, Jeremiah told himself. That atmosphere felt familiar, welcoming yet unnerving. For years, he had made it his rule to flee from anything familiar or protective, because he knew that all of it concealed weapons more dangerous than any enemy. He didn't want to feel safe; he didn't deserve that, and yet he had ended up in a place with all those characteristics.

He turned the handle and entered; the door was unlocked. Inside, the darkness was darker than total blindness. There was a smell of dampness and fermentation, a pungent odor that always brought back memories of the blood and medicine on the day of the operation. He searched, feeling his way through the dense darkness, for the proximity of the walls and a switch. But before he reached the nearest one, the high beams came on with the typical click of an electrical switch. Someone lived in the factory, and upon hearing him enter, they had turned on the lights.

"Is anyone here?" he asked, raising his voice.

Footsteps approached from the back, behind a partition. The room was enormous, and as the figure of the man whose footsteps were approaching became clearer, Jeremías contemplated the height of the building, the dark ceilings that were almost invisible, and a seamless balcony reached by a narrow staircase on the wall to his right. The room was completely empty, but in the offices accessed through the peripheral balcony, there were lights and furniture with open doors. Behind the partition at the back of the room, there seemed to be a makeshift room, with fabrics and clothes visible on the sides. The man who emerged from behind was overweight, but as he approached Jeremías, his figure increased in size, and from apparent

fatness he became morbidly obese. Nevertheless, he moved without difficulty, and his steps were harmonious, with delicate sounds. When he was a few meters from Jeremías, he stopped and extended a hand. He was dressed in a gray jumpsuit, somewhat soiled with brown stains, and Jeremías thought of the cobalt color of dried blood and the hydrogen peroxide used to try to clean it in vain. The man's obesity was excessive, but the jumpsuit seemed tailored to his body; clumps of dark hair protruded from the front closure over his chest, the same color as his beard and long, unkempt hair.

"Good morning, sir," the man said.

"Good morning," Jeremiah replied, without responding to the offer of a handshake. "What are you doing here?"

"I live here..."

"But this factory is mine. I rented it from the government a few days ago..."

The man changed his inert expression to a false obsequiousness. What had once been death in his black eyes was now a childlike gleam, as if created by theatrical makeup artists.

"Excuse me, but I have nowhere to live, so I found the factory unoccupied and moved in several years ago. It's like my home..."

"So you know you'll have to pack up your things and leave..."

"If it's absolutely necessary..."

"And how have you survived?" Jeremiah asked.

"Well, I've been involved in commerce... you understand, in a somewhat clandestine way, from my offices..." he said, casting a glance that was intended to evoke deliberate suspicion, toward the upper offices.

Jeremiah couldn't help but laugh, and the man realized that his trick was working: he was winning the stranger's affection. And Jeremiah, realizing everything, This, and without being able to help it, he got carried away.

"What kind of business?"

"Well, one that's in high demand around here. There are many childless couples, you know, due to the effects of radiation from recent wars. I'm in charge of finding children for those couples, abandoned children on various planets and their moons. Or people who can no longer care for them or simply don't want them."

"You must have many contacts, and complex means of communication, if you do it from these... offices."

"For now, it's the only location for my work. Wherever I go are my offices. I'm my own boss and my own physical workplace."

Jeremiah looked at him, thinking about the various connotations of what the man had said and meant.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Gregorio Ansaldi."

"And have you always been involved in commerce?"

Gregorio began to laugh; his teeth were yellow and a horrible breath came from his mouth.

"I've done everything, Mr. Ahasuerus."

Jeremiah couldn't move for a few seconds; he knew his complexion had paled and his forehead was sweating. He took a deep breath and said:

"That's not my name..."

"But, sir, you just told me..."

"I didn't tell you anything."

He couldn't ask where he got it, because that would have been like recognizing him.

"My name is Jeremiah Gottlieb."

"As you wish, sir."

The man's impertinence irritated him, but he couldn't bring himself to reveal himself, and he didn't know why.

"Can I stay at the factory, Mr. Gottlieb? I can be your assistant, help you with anything. What do you plan to manufacture?"

"I don't have anything planned yet. Do you know what this place did before it closed? Maybe the old machinery will still be useful."

"All the old machines are stored behind that partition; I sleep among the machinery. The original owners were French, and they had designed a line of toys that was very important last century. But now there's no longer a demand for that kind of product... Except..."

"I know what you mean, Mr. Ansaldi. Between you and me, we can create a demand. You with the children, I with the toys."

Gregorio filled his face with a smile Jeremiah had never seen on anyone in his entire life. It wasn't strange, it wasn't simple, it wasn't beautiful or diabolical. It was a smile that denoted knowledge, an intellectual smile that revealed incorruptible patience and unfailing understanding. An eminently human smile, without particularizations, the sum of all human smiles that had ever existed. And he wondered how old this man was, and how many men, women, and children had been incorporated into his body to possess such spontaneous knowledge of the human soul. Because there was no other way to explain his expression when he called him by that name he preferred not to name.

Days later, when they were both standing in front of the factory gate, after the men Jeremiah had hired had cleaned the gate and the frame surrounding it, they read what was written above the arch in Gothic script and in purely ecclesiastical Latin: Redemptor Hominis. He felt, even without looking at him, Gregory's gaze upon him, contemplating him as one observes a freak. In that instant, he felt as all his Jewish ancestors must have felt when faced with the prejudices of the common people: the horns, the smell, the prominent nose, and the greedy distrust that his race proclaimed from the rooftops. But Jeremiah was an atheist in that sense, and he was about to let his anger get the better of him, so he maintained a cautious silence.

Gregorio, however, didn't seem willing to let the opportunity pass, although his arguments would be more lacerating for their depth.

"I understand how you must feel, Mr. Gottlieb, faced with this legend..."

Jeremiah looked at him calmly.

"I don't care, I'm a free thinker," he said, unfazed by the other's caustic smile. He decided to get involved in the subject, and thus demonstrate his self-confidence.

"What do you know about the original owners?"

"As you can see, they were fervent Catholics. Redeemer of Man," he recited, hands behind his back, his eyes fixed on the legend above the door. "Are you going to have it removed?"

"Why? I already told you I'm not a fanatic, and besides, I've always liked old buildings and their peculiar ornamentation."

Gregorio laughed shrilly this time. Jeremiah looked at him in annoyance. "What's so funny?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Gottlieb," he replied, covering his face with his hand.

He was beginning to hate that false obsequiousness, which didn't fit with the sullen, overweight appearance of that body, because everything about it seemed false, like a disguise that could easily be changed.

"What I mean is, I didn't think you would tolerate that legend in your own house. You, my friend, who had the courageto remove his own right arm.

There lay the crux of the matter. Gregorio had put his finger on the sore spot he'd surely seen as soon as he'd arrived. This time it was he who laughed.

"Ansaldi, I've never had a right arm." And just when he thought he'd won that game, the other looked at him with detestable pity, because only now did Jeremiah realize that everything Ansaldi said had more than one meaning, and just as he knew his right arm hadn't been amputated by accident, he must also know everything about him and his brother. The name was no longer a mere coincidence, if he had ever considered it to be

that way during those days. He decided to stay away from the other while he decided how to get him out of the factory.

He entered the building alone, where the men he had hired were finishing removing the machines from the warehouse, others were cleaning the floors and ceilings. The walls had been renovated, the lights shone, illuminating the large space where the old machines still remained dusty and useless. The next day the technicians would arrive to get them working. Gregorio had offered to do it, but he didn't trust that if he accepted the offer, he would then demand favors in return. It was too much to let him live in the factory, when every attempt to find out about the work he did had proved fruitless.

He heard Ansaldi's footsteps as he began to climb the stairs toward the office area.

"Where are you going, Mr. Gottlieb?"

"To check those offices, Mr. Ansaldi. It's time to see what's useful and what isn't."

"My things are there, sir, my work stuff."

"So far you haven't told me what they are, so I'll go see them myself."

He continued up the stairs and heard Gregorio's footsteps on the steps, his heavy, smelly breathing. Then he felt his hand on his right shoulder. A stab of pain made him stop and sit on a step, but the hand had only rested. The men had turned around to look, at least that made him feel confident that Ansaldi wouldn't do anything to attack him. The silence Gregor maintained while his pain subsided was what he needed to assure him of that.

"Since you insist, I'll show you everything you want, but wait until the men leave."

"No, Ansaldi, they're my guarantee right now. I don't know what you did to my shoulder, but I don't trust you anymore."

Ansaldi laughed.

"You caused the pain yourself, Mr. Gottlieb, many years ago, when you removed your right side. Do you remember the holy scriptures? The redeemer of mankind ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God."

"Don't tell me lies, you're as Catholic as I am..."

"That's true, but not as guilty as you. The body knows these things, the scars, the pain, guilt takes organic forms, and your pilgrimage, Mr. Gottlieb, will never end, unless..."

"Unless what?"

"This factory can be the redemption of your eternal soul."

They got up and continued up to the peripheral balcony that led to the offices. He had climbed up only once in those days, to contemplate the

expanse of the factory. He had been impressed by the height and dimensions of the place. He hadn't tried to go through the doors, but now he saw that they were all lit from within, and the light didn't reach the center of the factory. It was an intense but not brilliant illumination, passing through the glass doors and the curtains that barely contained it, yet effectively concealed the interior.

Ansaldi walked beside him, the left one, on the side of the railing, while he walked down the corridor, his stump brushing against the walls and doors. When three passed, he said:

"That's enough. Let's go inside. I want to see what else I have to get the factory up and running."

"I told you they're mine, Mr. Gottlieb, not for your use."

"You should have thought about that before invading this strange place, Ansaldi. Everything inside is mine now; the law is on my side."

"Even the souls of children, Mr. Gottlieb?"

"What are you talking about?"

Gregor opened the nearest door with one of the many keys in the bunch he always carried. They entered, and the light was no longer as intense. It came from several jars or containers neatly placed on countless shelves along the walls, and on several tables in the center. It was a green and yellow light, as if produced not by electricity but by a natural energy source—perhaps biological?—it suddenly occurred to him. Then Jeremiah approached the jars and saw that inside each one was a human fetus in different stages of development. Pieces of human body smaller than a finger, others almost fully developed, like newborns.

"But you told me you traded in children..."

"And what do you think these are, Mr. Gottllieb?" "They're unborn, aborted."

"Certainly. My real business isn't getting children for adoption, but collecting the souls of those no one wants. How many do you estimate there are here, a hundred, maybe two hundred? Multiply that number by all the offices in this old factory. How many abandoned children, isn't it? Lost children or stillborn children, screaming into space, with no place to rest. Those screams disturb the parents who lost them. They destroy the lives of those who conceived them, and torture those who got rid of them. They're lost souls, Mr. Gottlieb; you must know what they feel. They've been cast aside, and they believe themselves guilty. In a way, they are, if they haven't been born. Perhaps humanity's sins require retribution from innocent beings, for that is its true reward." What good does it do God to punish a soul that will never fully repent of its actions, corrupt souls that cannot be repaired. But the souls of the unborn are the true treasure, the source of the greatest potential.

"Of what?"

"Of love or hate, of ultimate debauchery or sublime bliss. The circumstances of the universe, if you will, lie in the utilization of that potential. Peace or battle, destruction or the construction of seraphic Edens."

"And you, Ansaldi, what do you gain from all this?"

"First, survival. As you see me, I am older than you could ever give me credit for. I have survived so much and so many forms of myself. But the main thing is to possess the potential of these souls. I don't know if you hear them... I can. They scream and demand freedom, but out there they would suffer more in the chaos from which I rescued them."

Then Jeremiah began searching through the jars for something he couldn't quite pinpoint.

"You're looking in the wrong place..."

Jeremiah looked at Ansaldi, and on his face, he saw his own anguish.

"He's not here, but still wandering somewhere. You, my friend, can bring him in and ask for his forgiveness. Lay him to rest in these small, placid seas of formalin."

Jeremiah saw the name he had adopted shatter into pieces in his soul, and the pain in his shoulder was as sharp and exquisite as a scalpel.

"How?" he asked.

"The factory, dear Ahasuerus."

Then Gregorio Ansaldi embraced him with his enormous body, his arms surrounding him as if he were not one man but thousands. He felt welcomed for the first time in almost twenty years, and the warmth of Ansaldi's body was more comforting than grotesque, more blissful than irritating, but also irreversible. There was no way to let go.

Ten days later, the factory was operating as a commercial company under the name "Ahasverus Gottlieb and Associates." They had found the plans for the toys the old factory had produced. They were signed by a twentieth-century architect and designer, who, it was said, had committed suicide at sea. A very romantic story that had undoubtedly been exploited commercially in the factory's prosperous times, when the Earth was in the midst of a nuclear crisis, and toys were scarce for children born in exile. Now, the sound of machines had once again occupied the space of that building; the walls seemed to adore that sound, and the few workers who still knew how to operate them seemed to rejoice in their new splendor. Gregor and he had rummaged through the old papers with the plans, deciding which designs would be most appropriate for the era. They came to the conclusion that dedicating production to those products would force the factory to close again, but in a curious way, that fact wasn't too important. For Ahasuerus, who no longer denied his name, the factory was a way to find redemption, and so he searched among the designs for one

that reminded him of his childhood. He and his brother had had almost no toys to play with, except for technological ones. His parents kept old plush or porcelain dolls, reproductions of old twentieth-century motor vehicles or steam train cars. Both had held them in their hands, frightened by those ancient curiosities they didn't fully understand. They broke easily and lacked any color or movement of their own.

"We used our imaginations to play with them," their father had told them. The brothers looked at each other and shared their confusion. Then their father took the toys from their hands and took them with him, returning them to the trunk from which he had taken them.

Ahasuerus now remembered this episode, rediscovering connotations he had missed as a child. Like the look on the father's face as he held the toys in his hands, which seemed to turn back time and fill it with multiple possibilities that he realized he could never imagine. He saw, almost at the bottom of the box of drawings, a plan with the building instructions for a merry-go-round. He knew what it was; he had seen some of them in fiction films or documentaries. Looking at the plan, he noticed that Gregor was also watching him closely.

"You've been on one of them, haven't you?"

The other smiled.

"That's not the correct term, but rather, ridden on one, and many, a long time ago."

He wasn't going to delve into Ansaldi's lurid memories. Ahasuerus didn't know who he was, but he had an idea of what he was, and since he wasn't in a position to be demanding, he never inquired about the subject. The fact that the other knew what was in his soul had certainly relieved him, but it didn't remove from his past the weight he had carried for so many years: his brother's body, which he had never been able to shake off. It was, he told himself many times in dreams and while awake, a cross resting on his right shoulder. And the images of Christ, whom the faith of his ancestors had refused to recognize as the Messiah, constantly weighed on that shoulder. This fate of the Jews was tragic, even in such distant places, centuries away, continuing to be a stigma they bore with pride, because pain and suffering were a gift from the God of the Old Testament.

Suddenly, he had a revelatory idea.

"Perhaps we should start with this project. But if we build miniature merry-go-rounds, the children of today won't know what they're for. We have to give them the motivation to have them in their homes; some would be mechanical, others electric, and with digital and virtual elements. As my father used to say, you have to help your imagination. But we'll start by building a large-scale one, like the traditional ones. You must help me, Ansaldi, since you're the only one who's actually seen them."

Gregorio looked at the workers, among whom were a couple of old men who probably also knew what this was about. He signaled to them, and they stopped their work and approached the table. One was very old, with a

thin and agile body, so lucid that as soon as he saw the factory machines, he knew how to operate them as if he had left them idle only the day before. The other acted as a janitor or caretaker, since he sometimes became delirious and had lapses that must have been part of an old-fashioned delirium tremens. He walked slowly behind the other, as if fearful. Ahasuerus noticed him watching Ansaldi carefully.

"I asked you to come closer because Mr. Gottlieb wants to recreate a merry-go-round. The idea is to make it work like an old amusement park, although I think we should promote it as a museum," he said, laughing at the laughter that none of the others shared. "The idea," he interrupted, "is to recreate the attractions of the merry-go-rounds, with modern effects, of course, without losing the praise of the old days. And since you are experienced builders, you know what it's all about, I understand..." he concluded, his eyes on Ansaldi. "That's right." He pointed to the first of the old men and said, "Antonio's family has had a long career in the politics of old Buenos Aires; he has a superior intelligence and is a prodigious engineer who advised the architect of these plans. And Lorenzo," he said, approaching the other old man, withdrawn and fearful, patting him on the back, at whose touch he seemed moved like a ghost caught in the midst of convalescence, "is a very old friend and benefactor of Florence. How many years have we known each other? As you see it, Mr. Gottllieb, Lorenzo has been one of the greatest opera composers. And a merry-go-round needs that, I believe." It's a full stage, where the scenery, the continuous movement, the drama, and the almost hypnotic music that Lorenzo will have us listen to all conspire for everyone's delight, isn't it?

The old man was, without a doubt, a ghost, a soul escaped from the jars locked in the offices, not one of the infant or unborn souls, but surely one of those Ansaldi had preserved for his own survival. Ahasuerus approached the old man and looked him in the eye. Lorenzo remained silent, without lowering his gaze.

"It would be an honor for me if you both collaborated with us. I am certain it will be a complete success."

Thus, from that day on, the construction of the merry-go-round in the middle of the factory began. They moved the machines again and prepared the platform. Ahasuerus watched them work all day with a delight he hadn't observed even in the young men with whom he had worked in so many different trades. Antonio had his own team of carpenters and blacksmiths, and he went back and forth between the tables on which the plans for the miniature merry-go-round were spread out, making long and complicated calculations with an ease that surprised him.

Lorenzo, meanwhile, had been busyHe set about sculpting the figures that would occupy the merry-go-round, after choosing the materials for the scenery, mirrors, and costumes. At night, he would leave all this manual labor and lock himself in an office to compose the music. Gregor would disappear for much of the day, returning around dusk to assess the progress of the work. He acted as an indifferent witness, a false performance that didn't try to deceive anyone. What interest did he have in

this whole project, Ahasuerus wondered. Perhaps it was all his own work, as if he were a dark god overseeing the creation of a spectacle within a larger spectacle, a puppet show within the theater of life. Where had he heard or read something similar? Perhaps in a very old play called Hamlet? Four weeks later, the merry-go-round was finished. The four people responsible for its construction stood around it, observing it. Behind them, the workers had paused as if witnessing a ritual within a temple. And the spirit of the old architect was in the factory air. Ahasuerus could smell the damp scent of a distant sea, and he looked at Gregor, whose smile was a recess filled with guilty and saddened souls. Antonio approached the instrument panel and started the mechanism. The merry-go-round began to roll silently, the figures moved, some going up and down, others spinning around, the lights reflected in the mirrors creating a symbiosis between reality and the reflection that in a few seconds generated a hypnotic attention in all of them. The music was missing, which Lorenzo hadn't wanted to reveal until the day it opened to the public.

The day the merry-go-round opened was a Sunday. Sundays in Europe were strange days. Being a place dedicated especially to industrial production, during workdays the cities were almost deserted outside, the factories were packed with men and women, and in the homes the children rigorously learned their lessons. But on Sundays, everyone went out for a walk, hand in hand. Father and mother in front, the children behind, like a platoon, steadfast and fearful, seeing the factory-like appearance of the city, the tall, dark buildings, closed this time, like temples where their parents worked serving an unknown god. Ahasuerus wondered if there was some way to attract them to the new spectacle the factory offered, because it was the first time such a place was open on a Sunday, the exterior walls covered with posters that people read but didn't seem to fully understand. They had spread the word during the previous weeks, and they knew that almost all the city's inhabitants were there, in front of the factory, with the sole purpose of seeing the merry-go-round. Then Ahasuerus, like the host and ringmaster of a demolished circus, opened the doors and invited everyone in.

Its appearance was in no way different from what the old newspapers had portrayed amusement parks and circuses as if they were. He was dressed in a black tailcoat, boots, and top hat. In his left hand, a whip was held, and his right arm was absent, as if announcing the phenomena that would soon demand the spectators' attention. And when the factory doors opened, the sound of the carousel's music rang out stridently, first with the trumpet-like timbre of a festive feast in an imperial palace, then the sound of a pedal organ, sharpening to the tone of a barrel organ with melodious harmony, whose repetition grew increasingly rapid, then slowed down and resumed its syncopated rhythm. These were variations that Lorenzo had wisely alternated on a single, recognizable but continually renewed theme, as if it were another one at every moment, as if a new note were added anywhere on the staff, disrupting the monotony and at the same time giving the music an air of familiar ritual. Perhaps, Ahasuerus thought upon hearing it for the first time, it was a lullaby, one that nevertheless didn't allow one to fall into a deep sleep.

He saw people entering, their gaze entranced by the appearance of the factory, but attracted almost exclusively by the merry-go-round. It was very large, constantly rotating at a pace neither slow nor fast, just enough for the mirrors to perform their effects with the lights, casting luminosity toward the spectators' faces, while the figures on the merry-go-round moved in all directions, but always within the axis that kept them fixed. There were multi-colored flags on the roof, and a man to one side, standing next to it, had a ring that he shook with nervous restlessness and a laugh that stood out for its peculiar sound of bowed strings. It was Lorenzo, whose throat seemed capable of imitating every instrument in an orchestra, and now sounded like an out-of-tune cello. But none of that mattered, because the peopleHe had never seen anything like it in his entire life in that European city, so the spectacle they offered didn't need to be an imitation of the past, but a recreation with its own elements, even improvisation, even the strange.

Ahasuerus thought of his brother, how much he would have loved to see that spectacle of lights, music, and movement. Then he saw that among the spectators was a family arriving with Siamese children. They were two boys of five or six years old, joined at the back. The children walked side by side, with both arms on that side pointing at the figures on the merry-go-round, and both heads turning almost in unison at times, at other times colliding with each other in the uncontrollable amazement of what they had unexpectedly discovered. Ahasuerus's voice stopped in a whimper just as he invited several children to get on. The apparatus had stopped, and some were already beginning to settle inside. When the Siamese twins slowly and clumsily placed their feet on the first step, he tried to help them, but it was as if he had never dealt with that kind of child in his life. The parents smiled at his ineptitude and picked them up directly. The father placed them where Ahasuerus indicated. It was difficult to seat them on one of the figures, so they placed them next to one of the columns, and they held on with their four hands, becoming just another of the strange figures that were the attraction of the merry-go-round. He realized he was trembling when he stepped off and his feet hit the steps. The people laughed, and that specter of an improvised clown hid his unintentional clumsiness and hid his sorrow, the fearful look of horror that had invaded his eyes.

The merry-go-round then started moving, and began to turn slowly at first. The music sounded like a delicious source of tranquility in the air, soothing the psyches of those who watched the constant rotation as if it were the orbits of planets. Everyone's attention seemed to lull, or at least that's what Ahasuerus began to feel. The mirrors shone their lights on faces, bounced off the factory roofs, and flashed back and forth on the children. They laughed, and the shrill sound of excited, squealing voices mingled with the music. The speed of the merry-go-round increased, and the children began to jump in their seats, and their parents laughed as they seemed afraid for them. They held hands and hugged each other, worried and happy at the same time. Lorenzo held the ring toward the children, and they extended their hands as they passed by him, but he quickly withdrew his hand, taunting them, challenging them to be more daring. The Siamese twins suddenly appeared, trying to catch the ring. The first time he saw them,

two hands almost grabbed it, and Lorenzo, surprised, quickly retreated. Two turns later, three hands tried to grab it, but Lorenzo, now forewarned, was more cautious. Ahasuerus guessed what would happen on the next turn: four hands would try this time, and it would be dangerous if the Siamese twins broke free. But time passed, and twice he saw them still, sad. The speed of the merry-go-round increased, and he wondered if Antonio had done it on purpose or if something was wrong. He went to find out, pushing his way through the crowd to the control panel, but he had barely gotten close when he heard the scream of one of the parents, and he recognized the voice. The Siamese twins' father was saying something unintelligible, and Ahasuerus turned around, ready to return to the merry-go-round, whose speed was so high that the alarmed, screaming children could barely be distinguished. Four hands protruded from the platform, four arms that were too many for one of them to avoid being caught by the speed and falling beneath the iron platform.

Antonio was now crying at the controls, like an old man whose helplessness was for the first time strange and definitive. Ahasuerus remained still, because his right stump had begun to hurt in a way he hadn't suffered in years, while the workers tried to stop the merry-go-round. He had to kneel, holding his shoulder with his left arm, tears of pain distorting the images of the disaster around him.

The machine had begun to stop, slowly, and the injured children, hysterical, cried loudly as they jumped from the still-moving apparatus. The machine had begun to tilt, as if it were coming off its axis. He saw two movements in the apparatus, as if they had jumped over something in its path. Some parents climbed onto the platform to pull their children out, unaware that they were putting more weight on the Siamese twins beneath the floor. Ahasuerus buried his face in his left hand, but then dared to look into the dark space beneath the platform. Something told him that all of this couldn't be true, that it couldn't be happening. He tried to console himself by searching for clues in the hazy images of his eyes after the tears, in the chilling rhythm of his heart, in the vertigo the spinning and the music had induced. He thought he saw Gregorio Ansaldi at the back of the factory, contemplating everything like a god without hands, and the interrupted turns of the merry-go-round continued in his mind like repetitions of cycles in time.

Then he ran, pushing his way through the weeping mothers, through the screaming fathers struggling to lift the weight of the merry-go-round. They saw him lie down on the floor and begin to crawl toward the dark space where the Siamese twins were still moaning in pain. His body didn't fit in such a narrow space, but his left arm did, and he inserted it little by little, letting his hand walk along the floor like a spider. That's how the children felt, and his voice sounded loud and disconsolate. The men continued trying to raise the apparatus with levers, and they all saw Ahasuerus's left arm emerge, holding the hand of one of the children, injured, perhaps dead. He felt blows on his back, movements, and desperate screams from the parents. The boy's entire back was torn, permanently separated from his brother by the merry-go-round's iron grip.

Ahasuerus thrust his arm back in to rescue the other. This time he was tired, and his hand was no longer a spider but a slow, crawling insect. He saw the motionless body, but recognized the gleam of the eyes, which flickered a couple of times. As he lay there on the hard, dirty floor, he remembered the nights in his childhood bed, when he would discover his brother's still-awake eyes in the dark. But he didn't have time for anything else. The levers gave way because the men grew tired, and the platform sank, crushing his left arm. He no longer suffered any pain, and he knew his name was, now, Jeremiah.

THE MOON RABBIT

1

Dad was sitting on my bed. I looked at him with eyes so sad, so profound, that more than filial love, my love seemed like a kind of prophecy he could clearly read in my gaze. That's why he raised a hand, pointing to the window, through which a very faint moonlight entered. We were almost in the dark, with only the nightstand lit, with a lampshade printed with Disney characters. It was so opaque that those figures on my father's face were distorted, taking on aspects that not even Edgar Allan Poe would have imagined. But wasn't all this just my speculation? I wondered later. Although I was very young then, I wasn't so young that I couldn't understand what I considered a definitive turning point in my life. I was eight years old, and my father was going on a very long journey, much longer than the previous ones, when he traveled to and from strange lands he sometimes called Africa, and at other times Asia. This time, my father's destination was the moon. And it wasn't just my father who was leaving, but the man known in the world of anthropology as Claudio Levi. At forty, he had the prestige that others couldn't achieve in a lifetime. At thirty-five, he began his astronaut training. The next space voyage was his goal as the most qualified scientific companion available at that time.

I looked out the window, in the upper right corner of which the moon was visible, powerful and gentle at the same time, ethereal yet concrete like a mass of stones about to fall to Earth. There are those who feel the faint warmth of the lunar rays on their faces almost as much as the rays of the sun; I have never experienced it. That night before my father's trip, its light dimly illuminated the back of my father's neck, so between the figures on the screen on his face and the luminous shadow of the moon behind him, I saw his body as if I were at the movies. They'd shown me the documentary films he'd shot on his study trips: desolate, sandy landscapes, tropical jungles, towering mountains, immense, lonely beaches, erupting volcanoes. And in the midst of all these places, the body of Claudio Levi emerged triumphantly, his boots and pants soiled with mud, his classic jacket already torn from years of use, and the African hunter's hat that so closely linked him to Ernest Hemingway's photographs. But in my father's hands,

there wasn't a gun, but rather a camera case and a video camera, and in his backpack, who knows what other things I was never able to see until many years later: compasses, pencils, notebooks, and several very small glass containers, perhaps containing chemicals he used as reagents for geological surveys.

"What do you see there, Roger?" he asked me that night.

I looked out the window, observed the moon, and knew what he meant.

"The rabbit," I replied, smiling, and the moisture in my eyes betrayed me.

HowWhen I was even younger, he would stay in my room telling me about his travels, about animals and people, about elements of nature that I found as fascinating as if he were talking about outer space. I had mentioned this sensation once before, and he showed me the moon through that same window and told me that one day I would go there. That opportunity had arrived. The next morning, the space shuttle would take him to the moon along with two other crew members.

"What would you like me to bring you back from there?" he asked.

He always brought me some special object from his travels. The closet in my room was full of objects that over time lost their surprise and later also their meaning. Small, colorful clay pots with fantastic figures, necklaces with human handbone beads, exotic bird feathers, tribal masks, stone spear points, even pieces of baked clay that remained untouched in a dry corner of my room. My room had become a museum, which at the time made me feel strange and isolated. That's why my friends didn't come to visit, I thought, but really it was me who didn't invite them. I didn't know if it was shame, or pride?

"Whatever you can, Dad."

"I want you to look closely, what's the rabbit got next to it?"

I looked closely, and I knew what he meant.

"The bat and the ball."

My father smiled with a kind of happiness that stayed with me for the rest of my life.

"I'll get you that ball, Roger."

Then he turned off the nightlight, and only the moon illuminated him. He was at her mercy, in that room, next to me, but forever away. Now he belonged to the moon; she had absorbed him and taken him from my family and me. Many times I heard my mother complain about my father's absence, saying that the earth and his old bones had stolen her husband. But later it would be the moon that would steal him back for good, because after all, Mom was also another kind of rock illuminated on one side by the sun. The moon was a sporadic lover, hiding on cloudy days, growing slowly over the course of a month, and making herself desired by her very unreachable distance. The best lovers are those who cannot be touched, I've told myself many times. My experience with women has been so

superficial that I believe it has been a means of defense to avoid feeling hurt. The moon is too big and cold, like a demanding mother, like a possessive mother. She has taken away from me the sweet memory of summer mornings on the beach and left me with the dreadful feeling of loneliness on humid urban autumn nights. It has granted me contrast, it's true, which increases the value of what I love, but the bitter taste of grief doesn't erase the possibility of what is lost forever.

The moon, then, began to envelop my father with its influence in that darkened room. He left through the door, with the light from the hallway now in front of him, and the dead light of the moon at his back, pushing him forward. Then he closed it, and I stayed with it. Loving it and hating it, with no curtains to part it, only the silence of the room to simulate the darkness.

At that time, imagination took the place of sad reality, and seeing a rabbit with a bat and a baseball on the uneven surface of the moon was a reality that distanced me from the pain of seeing my father leave on his journey once again. Because truly, that night, although the feeling of not seeing him again was very intense, I didn't let it dominate my mind, and the farewell was like any other of his many journeys. That's how I explained the serenity with which I accompanied Mom and my brother in the car to the base from which the shuttle would take off. My father had left home many hours earlier; an Air Force vehicle had come to pick him up at four in the morning. I heard the truck engine I'd heard so many times in those last few years, and then I fell asleep again. I don't know why, but in the ensuing half-dream, that engine came to mind as that of an airplane, one of the many that had taken Dad on his trips to other continents. That, I think, was one of the reasons for such serenity: my father wasn't leaving forever, and like so many other times, he would return in a few weeks.

At that time, we lived in the District of Columbia, which was the most appropriate location for my father's many activities. From there he could set off on his travels and return with his luggage full of rolls of photographs and film, with notebooks already full and without any blank pages, and with a variety of objects that he would later give to museums or keep in his studio for research. In addition, there were his sporadic classes at the university. University, and his books and documentaries. I was born in Buenos Aires a year before my parents moved to the United States, when Dad had to begin his training for the trip to the moon. That didn't stop him from writing and traveling, but for six months of each of the following years, he lived practically cloistered at the air base where he trained.

On the last morning, we were allowed to watch the takeoff. The three families were in rows in the amphitheater in front of the screen with the images transmitted from the launch pad. We watched the shuttle ascend with its billowing smoke, slow as if at any moment it could stop and collapse under the effect of its own weight. What forces, I asked myself, must be in those engines? I knew that the higher it reached, the lighter its weight would be, and it would only need a slight propulsive force to travel

in a vacuum. I felt my mother's hands holding my brother's and my hands, one on each side, as the plane climbed and climbed, finally becoming a tiny tiny thing in the blue sky of March 25th. She cried when she couldn't see it anymore, looked at each of us, and hugged us. I felt that from that moment on, she would never let go of us again, and a kind of claustrophobia would overtake me every time I felt my mother's gaze or voice. I thought of the moon at that moment, white and faint in the daytime sky, a seemingly harmless stain on the skin of the universe, but perhaps the beginning of cancer.

Ten days later, they called us from the base. I heard my mother's voice on the phone, with cold tones, then sad, sometimes desperate, and I sensed tears in her eyes. I knew exactly what her face looked like, even without seeing her from my bed, the dress she was wearing, the position of her body in the chair next to the telephone table, the way her fingers held the receiver and the slight distance she held it to her ear, the gestures with which she brushed her hair from her face or wiped her tears, the choreography of her fingers as she spoke. And from all this, I knew what they were telling her. Minutes later, I saw her appear at the door of my room exactly at the moment I expected her, after hearing her slow, hesitant footsteps toward me.

"I have to go to the base, Roger. Dad's coming back soon."

I didn't fully understand. I searched for hints of answers on her face, or to read behind what she was saying.

"But Mom, there are two weeks left..." I thought I was being selfish by not showing joy at my father's early return. Then she came up to me and, hugging me, began to cry.

"I want you to come with me. I can't take him alone."

I knew then that my brother and I would have to be her support from then on; she was too dependent on us and my father. My brother was on a school trip, so I got out of bed and got dressed, while she watched me as if I were her husband, admiringly, but also with an anxiety bordering on the incomprehensible. Her eyes were like two moons, I told myself at that very moment, and from there my father fell like two simultaneous abysses, one mirror next to another mirror.

The Air Force truck came to pick us up. We left the house. Mom locked the door, slowly, as if in doing so she could keep a bomb about to explode calm. We got into the vehicle, sat in the back seats, and drove through the city in complete silence, looking out at the streets of the outskirts on a cloudy day. I looked at the sky through the window, in case I saw the shuttle capsule, but the clouds hid everything, even hope, degrading the very need for hope into a fluid that spread across the asphalt like the vilest of secretions.

Hope is a merciless killer, I tell myself now, after so many years. She is a well-dressed old woman with clear eyes who promises and promises without ceasing, encouraging with that neatness typical of the helpless, of

those whom not even mercy can tolerate. And with the hypocrisy of hope, I got out of the vehicle with my mother when we arrived at the base. A couple of soldiers escorted us, protecting us, to the conference room. There were countless journalists at the door, we made our way through them, but they couldn't prevent the flashbulbs from capturing us for posterity, nor could they prevent me from hearing stray words and phrases: the family of the anthropologist Levi, the first civilian on a study trip, a thwarted mission, tragedy... and the shorter they were, the more sensationalist and prone to melodrama, and for that reason, perhaps, the more true. But in life there is an element that those fictions could not simulate, the element of tragicomedy, the mixture that frustrates the plans of the gods, the only truly human element: vain hope.

We advanced toward the conference room, with high ceilings simulating the Heavens to explore, the walls covered with photographs of scientists and astronauts, generals, presidents. We sat and waited in the green corduroy armchairs. From time to time, Colonel Sánchez, my father's friend, said something to Mom, but I couldn't hear him. Then, the projection screen was lowered and images of the shuttle capsule appeared. A voiceover recounted the events: at this moment, the capsule is accelerating, we see how the rescuers are ready to recover the crew as soon as it hits the water. The capsule would fall into the middle of the Pacific Ocean, a thousand kilometers from the west coast. We saw it descend at an incalculable speed, but in the immense distance, it seemed to be falling slowly, and it was at that moment that hope began to deceive itself within each of us. I know Mom saw my father inside that capsule, probably asleep, but alive, ready to wake up when the atmosphere began to dangerously heat the surface and he would have to be rescued upon reaching the ocean. Finally, it fell with an explosion of water that seemed to splash us with amazement and joy. I hugged my mother, and we both cried with joy. We watched as the boats rescued the crew members and headed toward the capsule, which refloated after sinking on impact. They opened the door and entered. The wait was long, and when they emerged, only one of the three crew members was there, wearing his suit and helmet, so we couldn't recognize him. There was a scuffle in the area, many men stood in front of the cameras, and the transmission was interrupted intermittently several times. We stood up, frightened, and they sat us down again with reassuring words. In the second-to-last image we received clearly, we saw the crew member take off his helmet: it was Captain Williams. Shortly after, behind the gray patches of intermittent light, the capsule appeared alone, its door open, letting in the water that would slowly sink it if the helicopter prepared to lift it out didn't arrive first.

Later, when we were both home, our lawyer and legal advisor arrived. Mom was sleeping, but he woke her up. Colonel Sánchez was with him, and since he was the closest member of the family, he helped Mom get up. I sat in the armchair in front of the television, which broadcast the images of the crash over and over again. The lawyer gathered us all in the living room, darkened by the lowered blinds, to hide from the harassment of the press. The phone was off the hook, and Mom asked me to turn off the television in

a voice I'd barely recognized since that day. The lawyer, Dr. Vicent, was Spanish, and when we were home, he spoke to us in our language.

"Mirna, Captain Williams's report says that Claudio went missing on the fifth day after they landed on the moon. They lost contact with him both visually and by radio. It says he strayed too far exploring the terrain, collecting samples, you know how he was, stubborn as can be..."

Mom looked at him angrily.

"What do you mean he was..."

"But Mirna..."

"Where is his body?"

"He's considered missing..."

"But why did they return without him? They should have waited for him..."

"How long? The captain says Colonel Berg died looking for Claudio. He was gone for two days, and when Captain Williams went to look for him, he found him suffocating due to a malfunction in his oxygen tank. The entire mission was aborted, of course, so he returned, and alone as he was, it was a display of extreme skill and great luck on his part."

Mom lowered her head and hid it in her hands. She was wearing a black T-shirt and a skirt of the same color. Sánchez tried to comfort her, but she pulled away from him and hugged me. I was crying too, more scared than understanding all of this. What had happened to my father, where was he, why didn't they bring him back? In reality, I didn't understand anything, and as the minutes passed, everything was summed up in a single word that symbolized and abbreviated everything complicated into something understandable. The problem with death is that it is a mystery we can all intuit, the understanding of which is a kind of consolation. We are so accustomed to the effectiveness of death that we don't demand explanations about what lies beyond, and we accept it as an act of faith. That is why death contains the greatest faith any atheist or agnostic is capable of feeling. For the inevitable, there is only acceptance, and that is faith. But what had happened to my father was beyond the realm of the inevitable.

2

At that time, the legal process my mother decided to pursue against the government began. There was practically no precedent for anything like this, and Dr. Vincent advised her time and again not to do it. He finally resigned, and many lawyers, one after another, took over the case. After five years, the case was still ongoing. The government had closed the entire investigation into the same. ion if there hadn't been a trial involved, and my mother wanted to file a lawsuit against Captain Williams for criminal negligence. She said he should have at least brought Colonel Berg's body, if

he really hadn't been able to go looking for my father due to life-or-death issues.

One day, in the seventh year of the investigation, the captain arrived at our front door. I was painting the garden fence, and my mother looked out the kitchen window. At first, I simply heard an old man's voice calling my name. I turned around and saw a bald, very thin man in a neat but oversized suit.

"What can I do for you, sir?" I asked, suspiciously.

"Your father spoke to me a lot about his son Roger during the voyage, which is why I can still recognize you after all these years."

By the time I realized who it was, my mother had already stepped out and was standing a few feet away from us, wearing her kitchen apron and holding a dish towel, which she was twisting angrily.

"Don't talk to him, Roger. There's a restraining order. You know all communication must be between our lawyers, Captain, if they haven't already demoted him, which they should have done a long time ago."

The man looked around at the overgrown yard, the run-down house. The lawsuit had consumed all our savings, the ones Dad had left us, even the loans from my mother's family. My brother was working in Florida, had dropped out of college, and I had no choice but to stay and take care of Mom, studying and working part-time in the city. The captain had gotten out of a long Chrysler, and although the man's body betrayed a somewhat terminal illness, he tried to hide it with luxury and neatness. Therefore, the contrast was painful for us, and my mother couldn't help but feel irritated by that reality.

"Mrs. Levi, I've come to speak with you unofficially..."

"If you came to buy us, don't bother continuing the conversation. We know what we lack, but it's not exactly dignity..."

"I'm not so sure about that, ma'am. Over time, stubbornness takes its place, and dignity turns into ridicule."

My mother laughed.

"What nerve, Captain! A murderer who speaks of dignity to me..."

The captain took two steps forward, just before the first of the four steps that separated him from my mother. Suddenly, he began to untie his tie and unbutton his shirt, then I stepped forward and looked at his thin chest, covered in cancerous spots.

"I'm dying, Mrs. Levi, of skin cancer that started on that trip. Radiation, viruses, who knows." You can be happy if what you want is revenge...

"What I always sought was the truth, Captain." My mother was on the verge of tears, but she didn't stop scrunching up the dishcloth.

"I told her the truth since I returned. If I had to die with them on the damn moon to make it right, I'm sorry. One of the primary duties of our training is not only survival, but prioritizing a mission's objectives; your husband knew

that very well. Didn't you wonder why he went so far beyond his orders, risking our lives if something happened to him? Maybe he was the murderer, Mrs. Levi, Berg's murderer, and mine, if I hadn't decided to return."

Mom thought for a few seconds; I already knew that all this had crossed her mind many times. It wasn't a new question; the lawyers had raised the same issue. All of that would have been enough to exonerate Williams and close the case definitively, yet it remained open, as if someone were waiting for some other information to emerge.

"I came here, Mrs. Levi, to see if I can get you to give up your efforts. Claudio won't be returning, and you can't continue to bear the costs. I can do it until the day I die, but this trial is like a wound I can't heal no matter how hard I try."

"Poor Captain Williams, he's surely eaten away by remorse! God knew what he was doing when he got this illness. Now I feel calmer, even if the judgment is against us. There has been some justice, at least." Then she looked at me and said, "Roger, let's eat."

We both entered, and the kitchen door closed in front of Captain Williams, his shirt open, revealing his diseased chest. But before that, I noticed his hands trembling as he retied his tie, hands with brittle, stained skin. He returned to the car, climbed into the back seat, and rolled down the window. Briefly, like a flash, I saw him lift something from the seat, something that stood out for its dull age amid the glare of the sun on the glass and the car's bodywork, as the driver pulled the car toward the road. Then I couldn't see it anymore.

That afternoon, I walked into my father's study. Everything had beenpreserved exactly as he had left it the day he left. On the desk were dozens of letters that were never answered, and in a drawer, those that arrived after news of the trip, from all over the world, from friends, scientific societies, anthropological institutions, and universities where he had work commitments for the following years. My mother put them away without opening them in that drawer; the same one in his father's he would leave them before answering them. The room wasn't very large, and the very clutter of furniture and things provoked an intimate warmth in anyone who entered. The library occupied all four walls, and the only window and door seemed to squeeze through the shelves that reached to the ceiling. There was no set order; only he knew where to find what his studies or research required. It wasn't the first time I'd entered since his disappearance, but I still wasn't attracted to those things, at least at first. Back then, they represented just a way to stay in touch with him, to smell the unmistakable scent he had left on the books, on the wood of the desk, on the leather of the chair. Like a diver, I probed the warm air with the aroma of a mild tobacco he had once brought from India.

I was about to turn fifteen, and I already knew that my father had experimented with drugs, but always as a method for his studies. His soul was a force incapable of stopping or being afraid of anything. The first time I was invited to take drugs, I thought of my father. I lay on the floor of my

friend's room, dreaming of space travel in capsules that exploded before takeoff. My mind descended into mud-filled darkness, in which I probed for the moon. The moon on Earth, I told myself later, trying to analyze those dreams brought on by hallucinogens. I felt so much pain later, such an emptiness of doom, such irrevocable bitterness that I knew would last forever every time the effect wore off, that it wasn't hard for me to stop when my mother found out and forbade me. It was one day when I came back under the influence of a substance, and she saw it in my eyes and began to yell at me. And as she did, I smelled the alcohol on her breath. I slept dreamlessly for many hours. When I woke up, Mom was lying on the floor next to my bed, asleep. I woke her up, and she went into the bathroom. I heard the shower running for a long time. Then I saw her leave and go to her room. I went into the bathroom and saw the remains of her vomit in the toilet, the underwear scattered on the floor, the smell of alcohol that was undoubtedly coming from the mouthwash bottles. I emptied them into the toilet and flushed the toilet. I undressed and showered. With my hands over my face and my elbows resting on the tiles, I let the hot water wash away the remnants of death from my body, the corpses of unfinished dreams. An unexpected erection surprised me, and without thinking, I masturbated to destroy the sordid body my being had become, expelling sordidness for the sordidness already acquired, and to touch the depths of bitterness. Without my father, we were nothing, and my father was still in the study, almost sealed shut since his absence. That morning was the first time I entered that room in several years, and I couldn't stop doing so. When I was a child, I was almost never allowed inside while Dad was home, because on those rare occasions, he had to use the time to do everything he couldn't on his travels: answer letters from high schools and universities, catch up on the magazines he received monthly, talk on the phone, and, above all, write articles requested by those same magazines and make progress on some book he had promised to a publisher. When I left the room, I would glimpse the dark interior, lit only by the desk lamp. Then Dad would pick me up in his arms, pulling me away from the toys I no longer cared about, and take me to the basement where he kept the artifacts or relics he had brought back from his travels. There, he had a large worktable where he spread out his maps, and I could see the paths of long rivers, jungles, deserts, or ancient cities. I would ask what this or that thing was, pointing with my finger on the map, and he would explain, and then he couldn't help but tell some anecdote that had happened to him there. To me, all these stories were fascinating, and I believed them to be true in their entirety. But later, my mother laughed when I told her what Papa had told me, and she remained silent as if it weren't worth pursuing the matter further. I realized, even then, that she felt abandoned and alone during her husband's absence, and she found no alternative to comforting herself but to snub and belittle what my father did.

On the afternoon of the day Captain Williams came to see us, II entered the library and sat in the same chair that belonged to my father, leaned on the desk and rummaged through the old yellowed letters that had been sent to him. I began to read:

….Dear Dr. Levi…thanking you for your invaluable collaboration…we hope you obtain the benefits commensurate with your research…the university and its students await you…we regret the loss of the mask during the landing at Cape Esperance…the authorities of Ceylon have granted you permission to visit the ruins…in Mexico, they will take you by jeep to the pyramid…is what you told me about the god of Tenochtitlan true?…in Cairo, the consul will receive you, my esteemed professor…the inhabitants of the tribes in Senegal have fallen into disgrace, being attacked by their more powerful neighbors, supported by the military government…there are gold mines involved…diamond smuggling…they are exploited as labor… they threaten their families…the famine is terrible…the epidemic is advancing, and we await shipments from the United Nations, but they were promised to us months ago…

The images flashed through my memory as if I had lived them, and I remembered what my father had said so many times about genetic memory. He said that bones preserve the memory of generations, and it was an easy way to explain to me, at my age, something much more complex. But he said that in the bones he displayed on the table in his workshop, which he painstakingly cleaned with a delicate brush, he discovered more than with the carbon-12 method. He was able to determine their age almost precisely by simply cleaning them of detritus and observing them under a microscope. He did the same with the rocks he had brought, some of them with colors that attracted me like precious stones, but which possessed nothing more than the virtue of their ancestral years in the geological layers that had fused within them.

I got up and went to the section of the library where the tapes of the films he made on his travels were. He had already shown some in recent months, but he tried to avoid those in which he appeared directly, filmed by one of his collaborators. He preferred those he had filmed alone, which he also preferred, as he had once told me. I scanned the shelves with my eyes, my fingers brushing the spines of the film boxes, reading the titles. Sometimes the information was just the place or the year. I came to one that said: Mozambique, April 1967.

It was the exact month I was born, which is why it caught my attention. I'd never seen it before. My mother told me many times, with clear resentment, that when I was born, he was on a trip he'd planned even though he knew the date I was due. In their many arguments, I heard him say that the birth was expected in May, and I had gone ahead. According to Mom, she suffered from the displeasure of his absence, and that's why I gave birth early. I never knew what the truth was. My father always lost the battle with my mother, most often due to abandonment, and he left sooner or later, on another study or exploration trip, as if rocks or old bones were easier to understand or live with. I took the tape out of its case and put it in the player. I turned on the screen and sat down in the desk chair. I waited for the video to begin after the usual wear and tear. It had been many years since anyone had projected it, so the tape seemed to be waking up like an old man in the early morning. There were no titles, of course, just the hour and minute numbers in the upper right corner. It was 3:30 in the afternoon when my father had started recording. The footage was in black and white

and began with a shot of a valley next to a mountain. The camera moved with the filmer's steps on a stony and uneven surface. In front of them passed many men from the tribe, some wearing loincloths, others naked, almost all carrying spears, their long, mota-haired hair adorned with stone beads, rings around their necks and ears, and pierced noses. They passed in front of the camera and greeted my father with a friendly nod. The video audio was terrible, but enough to hear the sound of the drums, whose monotony became hypnotic and rhythmically pleasing as the minutes passed. My father walked, sometimes the recording was interrupted, only to continue many meters ahead, when he reached the valley where the tribe lived. Trees were scarce, and a drought seemed to have dominated that valley for many months. There were animal skeletons in the surroundings, ramshackle huts where women came and went with children in their arms or hanging from their necks like monkeys. The camera moved from hut to hut, and the men went to shake my father's hand, who then appeared partially before the camera. And I thought about whatThat same hand had stroked my hair the night he promised to bring me the gifts of the moon. The hand with dark hair on the back, prominent veins, and strong tendons.

Then he reached an arid area without huts. A vast desert where the dust rose in the wind, which could be heard in the audio like a whistling sound. The drums continued thundering, but were now more distant. From either side of the chamber, the men of the tribe appeared in two lines, trotting and chanting a kind of prayer. Both lines grouped around a pit that grew larger as my father approached, until they were very close, and therefore in the center of the circle of men. They had sat down and continued chanting the prayer. Then the camera panned until it focused on the man who must have been the tribe's witch doctor. He was old, with long, flowing gray hair that covered his torso. He wore a white loincloth, his legs and arms encircled by concentric ribbons, his neck elongated by the rings that had been placed on him year after year since he was a child as he grew. His earlobes were pierced and enlarged with large-diameter hoops, and his nose had rings piercing the septum. But what caught my attention most was what he was carrying in his arms. It was a corpse, and he carried it like someone carrying a recently deceased loved one, someone he mourned and carried to their final resting place. He walked slowly, ignoring the camera. My father followed him on the path to the well. The old man carried the corpse as if it weighed nothing; he made strange sounds, and the prayer of the circle of men began to swell alongside the drums, which trembled louder, undoubtedly getting closer, even though they were out of sight. Then the witch doctor dropped the body into the well, which must have been very deep, because the camera approached right at the edge, and nothing could be seen but darkness. The old man remained by the edge, now on his knees, imploring the gods with gestures and shouts, rocking back and forth, so much so that he seemed about to fall into the well. A long line formed behind the witch doctor, with men carrying vessels that the old man emptied toward the bottom. The liquid was dark, but impossible to guess what it was. It was a ceremony that lasted almost half an hour, then the old man stood up and turned toward the camera, raising a hand signaling my father to stop. The camera paused, then started

recording again, but the lens was positioned much lower, at the level of my father's hips. Evidently, I had tricked the witch doctor, because he wouldn't be able to stop filming right at the most important moment of that rite. Before the recording stopped again, I heard Dad's voice: "It will probably be two or three hours. I should stop recording. Maybe they'll notice, and I shouldn't take any risks. This is incredible, something wonderful is going to happen. I'll be the first to film it. I must speak quietly; the witch doctor is resting by the well..." The recording restarted at ten at night, the almost total darkness slowly being overcome by the bonfires around the well. Dad's voice attempted to describe what had happened in the interval, but was interrupted as soon as the witch doctor jumped up abruptly, as if waking from a nightmare. He leaned into the well and uttered some incantations in the local language. Then he turned to the crowd that had begun to surround the well—not just men but women and children—raised both arms and said something like this: nei ambé.

A strange sound began to come from the well, like a roar. The crowd fell silent, almost as vast as the sky that hung above them all, threatening and empty, so like nothingness, so like the beginning of everything, I thought. Because in that room was the well, too, within the walls of the library, an enormous deserted space seemed to have been created, filled with the shining eyes of black men and women. I felt the cold of the night in the Mozambican desert, and the drums thundering mercilessly for my death and that of everyone else. From the well rose again the now incessant, growing roar. And behind the sorcerer, the figure of a lion rose, holding onto the edge with its claws, and when it was safely on the ground, two more lions began to emerge from the well. Then I thought: one man for three lions. And my father had been the first to bear witness to it and leave it engraved forever.

3

Fifteen years after the failed project, the government would resume the plan to colonize Earth's moon. Although I didn't know it, preparations had begun the very day Captain Williams was the only one to return from the previous voyage. Finally, fifteen years later, everything was ready to be announced to the public: the next launch would take place in two years.

I was already twenty-three, and I was about to finish my studies atAnthropology and Social Sciences. I would graduate the following semester, and I planned to begin my residency to write my final thesis. The subject would be none other than the one that had obsessed my father. From the day I saw the recording of the ritual in Mozambique, I couldn't stop going to the library and reading every book I could get my hands on, and watching all the films preserved on the shelves. Old tapes, some already ruined by humidity. But those that dealt with that African ritual were carefully stored in plastic boxes, protected from the deteriorating factors of the environment and time. When I played them again and again, trying to understand a little more each day, particularly in the early stages

of my dazzle, they seemed with a perfection bordering on the real, as if I were in that distant place and time, next to my father. Because I felt like he was speaking to me at that moment. His voice, sometimes cracked, hoarse from the humidity, tired of making itself heard over the rumble of the drums, sometimes frightened, but always enthusiastic, fascinated, became increasingly pleasing to my ears. I hadn't heard him since I was eight years old, and everything he said in the films now was new to me, so it felt like he was still alive, and I was discovering new facets of his complex personality. Expressions on his face that I would never have discovered even if he had remained with us many more years. On one occasion, in one such recording, he is heard saying something in dialect to a native speaker standing in front of the camera. The man smiles and nods his head. Then the camera turns off for a moment and turns back on, focusing on quick, vague images until it stops on the image of my father, young, disheveled, bare-chested and tanned, wearing his usual hat, a beard several weeks old, Bermuda shorts, and sandals made by the natives. That time, when I saw him, I pressed the pause button and stared at him. I think I fell asleep with his image, missing him, realizing how much I envied him, trying to feel anger and hatred for having left me alone in that library with mere books and tapes that brought no love except when opened.

When I woke up, I saw my mother standing in the library doorway. Who knows how long she stood there before I realized. She had one hand on the doorknob, bracing herself to keep from falling, and in the other a bottle. I stared at the screen as if entranced, penetrated by the image of my father, the man I had never been able to stop loving, despite not understanding him, despite feeling overwhelmed by that intelligence I couldn't follow, and which, unwittingly, sowed in others a resentment that couldn't grow in its own soul. And in exchange for hatred came frustration and anger. Many times she yelled at me for locking myself in the library, threatening to burn down the house so that all memory of my father would finally disappear. But this time she said nothing; she looked at me as if saying goodbye, and left without closing the door. I heard her locking herself in the kitchen and shuffling pots and dishes to prepare dinner. Dr. Vicent no longer communicated except by phone, very occasionally. Our case remained open, on appeal, before the Supreme Court. Colonel Sánchez had given up trying to comfort her. I knew he was in love with her, and he tried to reach out after my father's disappearance. Nothing came of his attempts, and he never visited the house again.

It was just my mother and me, with the brief, obligatory visit of my brother, who came from Florida to tell us about his prosperous life in the casinos, to tell us about his large family, which he never brought. I saw on his face, as we ate dinner in the dark dining room of our old house, the shame that dominated his soul. My mother, an alcoholic, and I, an unclassifiable imitation of our father. His body was beginning to gain weight with prosperity, his clothes were flowery shirts, Bermuda shorts, and his hair was beginning to thin. In some ways, he resembled my mother when I was a boy, but now they were diametrically different. She was wasted, so far from the beautiful refinement she had possessed when my father met her in the halls of the Natural History Museum in Buenos Aires. I saw

photographs of the two of them together at that time, beautiful and intellectual, against the backdrop of ancient skeletons. And that was what ruined them, the past, which gradually took center stage in every memory, becoming as real as the present. And that's what I saw in my brother's eyes, the same kind of incomprehension as in my mother's.

Not long after, about six months, maybe, she died. I found her one morning, in her bed, with an overturned glass on the nightstand, and her body covered by the messy, dirty sheets. I entered the room, touched her hand, andSeeing that she was no longer alive, I uttered what appeared in my mind every time I saw her since I'd heard those words in the first film, and which I wouldn't have tolerated hearing from my own mouth, even if I didn't know what they meant.

"Nei ambé," I said, and repeated it several times, hoping like a child that something would happen, that somewhere in that room, somewhere in the house or the world, something would be reborn.

After the funeral, to which my brother came alone, with the shadow of his phantom family in his mouth, we stayed at home, alone and almost without speaking.

"What are you going to do?" he asked me, sitting in front of a glass of whiskey at the dining room table.

"Stay in the house, keep studying."

"Are you going to do the same thing as the old man? Travel and bring back bones?"

I looked at him angrily.

"If you're trying to sell the house and keep half..."

Now it was he who looked at me angrily.

"What I'm trying to tell you is to sell the house, but I don't want anything. It's just so you can get rid of all the shit from the past and come with me to Florida."

"To work at what?"

"Some business, I don't know. You're not going to tell me you're fascinated by the same thing as the old man. Yours is pure sentimentality, not vocation..."

We remained silent while I thought about what he had said. I stood up and poured him another whiskey.

"I don't know what this feeling is, but it's what I feel. Leave me alone, and go be with your family."

I said this in Spanish, and I heard the porteño accent he had used, trying to imitate my father's. He looked at me and laughed; in Florida, he must have been more accustomed to the Cuban accent. He left the next day, and we might never see each other again. Neither of us would have bet a crumb of bread on each other.

Like those coincidences that never happen, except through ignorance of the hidden machinations of the petty gods of the shadows, I received a call from Colonel Sánchez.

"Williams is dying," he told me. Then I answered:

"So?"

"He wants to see you."

"I don't want to, Colonel. Years ago he came to my house to make excuses we didn't ask for. If he now expects my blessing, he'll have to die without it."

"Roger, for your father's sake, at least, he would have wanted it that way."

"And who says that?"

"I was his closest friend for many years. Anyway, Williams says he needs to see you; it'll only take a few minutes of your time; he's on his last legs."

That night I went to his house in the suburbs of Washington. A dwelling that was once a model of those built during the 1950s. Williams lived alone, except for a black maid who cleaned the house. When I entered, she greeted me, and I sensed she looked more distraught than someone who's merely an employee should be. She escorted me to Williams's bedroom door, knocked, and opened it. He was sitting on the bed, feet flat on the floor, trying to get up. The woman ran to stop him, and the two began arguing like an old married couple.

"Behave yourself, dear old man, here's Mr. Levi," I heard her say, then he looked up over the woman's shoulders and looked at me in fear. I saw such sadness on his face that all bitterness and resentment seemed futile, and I felt ashamed. Williams wasn't half the man I had known.

"Claude," he said. That's what she affectionately called my father when they were young.

"No, he's his son, Roger," she said, and lifted his legs to accommodate him on the bed, as easily as if he were a feather pillow. When he left us alone, I stood, and he looked at me, pointing to a chair. I shook my head and sat down on the bed. He smiled, and it was more of a toothless grin than a smile. He was naked under the sheet. His once hirsute chest was hairless, and his skin oozed a smell that filled the room. The cancer stains oozed fetid fluids, and I imagined he was looking at maps of unknown lands.

"Son, I wanted to see you. Your father and I, that day we took off..."

"Mr. Williams, let's not talk about it anymore..."

"No, please, I must tell you. I should have done it years ago, but your mother wouldn't let me get near you or speak, and I know my letters never reached you..."

I knew nothing about those letters, but I wasn't surprised by what I heard.

"The day we took off, your father gave me something." He told me to give it to you if he didn't return from the trip...

"But then he knew..."

"No! It was pure sentimentality, that's what I thought at the time. Everything will be fine, I told him, but he insisted, so I accepted what he entrusted me with. Then all that happened..."

"What happened?" I asked, sensing that perhaps the long-awaited confession was coming.

"What everyone already knows, his disappearance... nothing more. Now that I'm dying, I must give you what he entrusted me with."

He raised an arm, pointing to a drawer in the cabinet across from the bed.

"In the last one, there's a box." Ja blue.

I got up and went to the furniture, opened the drawer and saw the box. I went back to bed and sat. He told me with his head to open her.

Inside there was a baseball, and remembered our conversation the night before his departure.

-Your father explained to me what it was, that promise he made to you. He told me that if I did not return home, I gave you that ball as a gift brought from the moon. I had to do it when you were little, of course, but with everything that happened, at first I forgot it, and then I considered it already useless.

Take the ball spin in my hands. I felt carefully with my fingertips. I took her under my nose and sniffed the smell of old leather. And that aroma brought me a reminiscence of images that I had never seen. The desolate landscape of the moon, the rocky aridity and the lightness of the body when walking on the surface. The capsule several meters behind me, moving away because I was moving away. I was my father, I had been in that distant place full of fear and astonishment, with the shadow of Mother Earth as an obstacle of coldness on the road.

-You don't get angry with your father, Roger, he just tried to stay in illusion.

I smiled at the dying old man, because that was what he needed.

-Was something when he moved away from the capsule?

-The technical, the usual, and ended up saying something that I did not understand, like a wink even among scientists, but I was always nothing more than an astronaut.- And an almost naive smile illuminated his face for a moment.

He died two days later. I brought the baseball at home, and during those two days I kept thinking that when I said goodbye to Williams forever that night of my visit, I approached his ear and said: Nei Ambé. His face had acquired the expression of fright, and I am sure that when he died, he was buried with that grimace.

4

My father's papers were so many, that I suspected that I would not reach life to read, and above all, in deciphering and understanding everything I had written. Sometimes I had to resort to the bibliography that I cited, which took me a long time looking for the corresponding books, then the chapters and the pages. Sometimes it was not the right edition, or because the book had been lost and had been consulted abroad. However, it was essential to me if I wanted to understand what the original text said, so I went to the public library to consult the computer files.

At home, I read their articles for anthropology and geology magazines, I had even written for some scientific societies that were dedicated to the subject of the paranormal. So it was that I reviewed the handwritten notes related to the filming in Mozambique. On this subject I had not managed to publish anything. I wondered the reason for such carelessness, or if perhaps it was due to external pressure, or mere discretion before being sure of their conclusions or hypotheses. My father was not a simple journalist who had limited himself to transmitting a real and amazing rite. If he did not find pure logic based on the mentality of the tribe he studied, he never exposed it to the criteria of the public or his colleagues. His constancy amazed me, but above all it made me feel exhausted by force of reasoning and constant tests and counter -tests. Not a small rock was out of its rigorous analysis, or a bone that could suspect the slightest possibility of being fraud. Therefore, when it came to the tribes and their pagan rites, it was even more extreme in its rigorous methodology. He knew that what he had witnessed was something too strange and controversial, too close to yellow sensationalism if he had published it in his virgin nature. I needed to explain it, check it experimentally in many more opportunities, and the problem was how to do it. This was what he wondered in the note of his agenda of the year 1967. I looked on that same agenda, in subsequent annotations, but there were references to that episode only sporadically. He must have been looking, asking each man and woman in that tribe and in the surroundings, gaining their confidence to speak to that rite. But I just realized that if they had allowed him to witness the entire ceremony, it was because they already had enough confidence. Therefore I looked for the filming before filming, and in a one -year note I found the first retrospective event. Since then, in notes taken on different occasions, since he was younger, almost a student recently graduated in his initial field studies, there were already multiple references to those episodes. I didn't know where they started, so I read in reverse, as if listening or saw a tape at the same time that I rewind her. Each of the appointments mentioned in parentheses a number corresponding to an audio recording. Among those tapes I found the ones thatthat survived the humidity, and I could hear nothing but sounds bordering on gruesome, or at least that's what my

imagination found. My fin-de-siècle mind was too tainted by fictional influences created by Hollywood or bad horror literature. I had no choice but to return to my father's sources, notes, and books.

In the 1967 entry in Mozambique, he had attempted to offer a tentative theory of the tribal ceremony, actually the product of several others he had already witnessed without being able to film. The pit where the native's body had been thrown was a lion trap. At first, I thought it was simply some kind of pagan sacrifice in which they gave carcasses to the lions to appease their hunger. But my father explained that on that occasion, as on many previous occasions, the pit was empty. Other tribes that didn't even have contact with each other did almost exactly the same thing. In many, the rite leaders varied; one or more witches participated; others shortened or postponed the ceremony, sometimes lasting for several days. In one of them, the witch doctor even threw himself into the well in despair, and after each of these rites, a new one had to be chosen. Some tribes used more elaborate music than simple drums, with flutes and other very varied wind instruments. I remembered hearing something similar on recordings, a kind of sound emanating from an instrument that struck me as long, like a kind of narrow trumpet. My father had made sketches, of course; he wasn't a very talented draftsman, but he had gained great skill with the necessary practice. I found the drawing of the instrument, and playing the recording again, I could see, as if I were there, the native playing his curious, extremely long flute, resting one end on the floor, from which a curved beak extended to emit a sound that imitated the real wind, but more harmoniously, as if he were a god-man commanding the forces of nature. I felt a cold breeze in my father's library and looked toward the windows. They were all closed, and I shuddered. My God, what am I getting myself into, I said to myself. Then I looked down at my father's notebook, and in a marginal note I'd never seen before, was written the very thing I had whispered.

I looked around the dim, warm darkness of the room and heard a kind of shattered silence as the recording stopped. Anything was possible, I thought. If man was capable of reaching the moon, why wouldn't he do what, according to my father, the ancient tribes, far from the taboos of reason, religions, and laws, had managed to do? It was, after all, nothing more than an extension of a capacity that man possesses in his nature, that is, the likeness to the gods determined by his very nature. A capacity that animals also possess, but which, due to their lack of understanding, they are incapable of ritualizing. It requires the middle ground in which these tribes found themselves: uncontaminated by the rational psychology of Western man, and above simple animal instinct.

Apparently, it was all about the transmigration of souls. A man's soul was transmitted to one or more animals. A dead body could be used, which went to a living or recently dead animal, or even to someone who was dying. The possibilities, my father told himself, could be many. And as he reached the end of the page in his 1971 notebook, he wondered if it would be possible to concretely transform one body into another, without loss of matter, without using anything other than the man's original mass.

In his 1973 notebooks, after suffering a bout of beriberi that nearly killed him and interrupted all research and notes for more than a year, he began to ask himself questions without order or logic, as if something were trying to break through the chaos of his mind, still clouded and affected by fever and altered metabolism. When he sat down to write again—and I remember my mother frequently commenting on this as a reproach, as if it had been the last, now forever lost, opportunity for him to leave that profession that distanced him from her—he had already recovered physically, but his gaze remained lost in thoughts that he tried to transcribe in his notebooks. These were the notes I had begun to read, and I noticed the change in his handwriting after the illness, clearer in his spelling but more incoherent in the methodology of his logic. One of the most frequently asked questions was the possibility I mentioned earlier, that of the transformation of bodies. He arrived at the following reasoning: if the soul is energy, and if the transmigration of the soul gives life to the body, then body and soul are an amalgam, Something that cannot be divided without both dying. The tribal healers had told him that the time in which the soul migrates from one body to another is limited not only by the consequent degradation of corpses, but also by the life of the soul in the ethereal. The soul loses strength and identity, becoming confused with the homogeneous disparity of the collective, with the great unity to which it is drawn like a magnetic force.

In one of those notebooks, I found a reference to an episode that occurred in Tanzania, very shortly after the one whose recording was my first encounter with the subject. I searched the shelves for the tape from the aforementioned date. In the notes, my father only indicated that it had been an important experience, but given his mental confusion during his convalescence, he implied between the lines that it had in fact been more than transcendental. This was evident in his disordered handwriting, trembling as if he were under the influence of fear, even if it was nothing more than the effect of a drug. But just as mescaline worked for some writers, sparking the imagination, the drugs my father took to recover, and I imagine some others he brought or learned to take on his travels, plunged him into a state of dullness that significantly diminished his imagination. Therefore, during those notes, I had to assume that everything he said fell short of the reality he had experienced.

I turned on the player and waited for the recording to begin. Suddenly, a jungle landscape appeared, dense as only the African jungle can be in its virgin places. The camera moved, resting on my father's right shoulder. You could see the right side of his face and his left hand pointing at trees, small animals scurrying by on their way, an uncut path he carved out with machete blows from time to time, interrupting the recording only to resume later. He pointed out ancient formations on tree trunks, parasites under rocks, and the vines that covered the ground. A few snakes hung from the branches, peering into the camera lens, and my father was careful to avoid them by moving with a slowness that simulated slow motion. As he continued on his way, he explained that he was heading toward the settlement of a tribe he'd heard about. The Hamba say that this tribe I'm addressing has no name. They've lived in that practically inaccessible

region of the jungle for as long as they can remember. They survive on what they hunt, nothing else. And this hunting can be of animals or humans, it makes no difference to them. They don't fish, they don't farm, they don't produce medicine. Anyone who falls ill dies, unless the tribe's witch doctor can save them with his spells, and this happens very rarely, because according to the Hamba, such cures are only for mental illnesses. For them, a body that falls ill is no longer useful, and that's why they replace it. I asked them what they meant by that, because I suspected they were practicing the same ceremony I had already witnessed with the Hamba. They nodded, but refrained from clarifying what their longing gazes conveyed: their rituals are more sophisticated, more transcendent.

With these words, their story was interrupted, and the road, after a dark pause in the recording, turned into a small clearing dotted with rudimentary huts. There were completely naked men around, children running around, and women coming and going with wicker vessels under their arms or on their heads. When my father came a short distance from them, some stopped to look at him, leaning closer, examining him from head to toe. They were thin but stocky, their faces completely bare of any adornment or paint, their thick lips revealing large, very white teeth. For a moment, forgetting his entire life since that event, I feared for my father's life. The camera betrayed a slight tremor, and I knew he was afraid at that moment. The men didn't have weapons on them, but they did have their hands, and above all, their teeth. If cannibalism is your custom, it may be the last thing I ever record, he had said a few minutes earlier, in a very low voice, just as they approached to take him by the arm and examine the camera. My father didn't turn it off. The lens showed disjointed, confusing images of the ground, of the sky between the tall trees, of the faces and bodies of the men who were touching the camera, passing it from one to another. Then it returned to my father's hands. The men said something, he answered in the same dialect. Some stood behind, others in front, and he walked among them toward one of the huts. The children surrounded him, touching his clothes, jumping to touch the camera. They entered the dark hut, full of insects around a clay pot in which a woman was mixing something that smelled very bad, because my father put a hand to his mouth, makingIn the other, the camera moved. Only fire illuminated the place. Then he left the camera on on the floor, far enough away to provide a long shot of the circle that had formed around the pot, in which he was standing. They began to speak in dialect for a long time, so I couldn't understand anything. But the men's gestures were friendly. The woman took food from the pot and served it on a platter, which she passed from hand to hand. When it reached my father, he smelled it first, which didn't sit well with the others, judging by their faces. Then he brought the rim of the platter to his lips and swallowed. There was no expression on his face that conveyed disgust or pleasure. I admired my father then, with silent satisfaction, as if the Native Americans in the library of my North American home could see my joy.

Apparently, the conversation had revolved around the subject that had brought my father to that place. It seemed strange to me that they had accepted him so quickly, even that they were willing to let him witness the

ceremony. But besides the fact that my father arrived with knowledge of their own language and was practically an envoy from the neighboring tribes, perhaps these men didn't consider their rites to be anything especially supernatural. Lacking any Western taboos founded on religions that repressed any thought or action that strayed from their canons, for them the material was irremediably fused with the spiritual. The nature in which they live transforms everything, and they see it daily. They coexist with the dead; they are in their flesh, and their spirits in the bodies of other men and animals. Spirits they recover by hunting and consuming them. This is the theory I imagined, at least until this moment when I saw my father stand up and undress. He was wearing only his pants and boots; he usually traveled bare-chested because of the unbearable heat, even at night. When he had stripped off everything, they led him toward the hut's exit. The camera remained on the ground, focusing on the pot on the fire and the woman. I heard voices, and again the camera was raised on my father's shoulder. He had been authorized to carry it, and who knows if they knew or even imagined the true purpose of that device. Perhaps they thought it was like a charm for my father.

When they left, it was already dark. The chirping of birds and the shrieks of children could be heard. An authoritative shout from one of the old men scared them off, and they disappeared, scattered through the huts or the jungle. The group leading my father continued along a path cut through the trees. I could see the swaying bodies of those in front, clearing the way when necessary. Naked and barefoot, they moved with the dexterity of apes, but at the same time their erect backs and intelligent movements demonstrated a methodology studied through trial and error. The way they would take a branch and study it carefully, conversing among themselves, then the way they cut the leaves, in which they found parasites that they perhaps used for their rituals. They seemed to be searching for something in particular, and finally found it in a bush at ground level. Two of them bent down, and my father's camera peeked out over their shoulders. They were digging in the earth, until they unearthed some kind of torture shell, but it was more like a soldier's helmet. I thought I was hallucinating, but a moment later, they turned around, facing the camera directly, and I confirmed what I suspected: it was a soldier's helmet. Was it possible that they had devoured one of the many soldiers who had fought in Africa? A soldier lost in the middle of the jungle that no one had ever visited before. The helmet passed from hand to hand, being cleaned of earth a little at a time, until it reached my father's left hand. He turned it over, peering inside. Daylight was dim, but he could see a name, and he brought the camera closer to the plaque where it was engraved. The surname was Berg.

I remembered that was the name of the astronaut who had gone in search of my father when he left the capsule on the surface of the moon, and who had died searching for him. At least that was what Captain Williams had always stated in his report and in his subsequent statements during the court proceedings over the years. My father returned the helmet, and they continued on their way. If it had been the grandfather or father of Colonel Berg, who would later accompany him, the subject might have come up in

some conversation during the months of training. But all this was my conjecture, of course. Nothing in my father's attitude led me to suspect anything more than scientific curiosity about what he was witnessing.

It was already deep night when they arrived beside a narrow stream, whose current sounded faint yet very clear. The shadows of bodies in the shadow of the night. They gathered around the chamber, watching the red light that shone like a fixed star fallen from the sky. That's probably what they thought, and my father took the opportunity to make his authority felt. He spoke at length, and the men looked at him and listened after lighting a fire. They then stood up and began to move around, carrying things back and forth. The chamber remained still, and deigned to move when my father considered everything ready. It was a kind of low altar, with branches and a pile of objects that must have belonged to dead men and women. The group consisted of ten men, and except for the two who began to lead the rite, the others limited themselves to singing a litany similar to a motet. It was like being in an immense church, with the water from the stream running like sacrificial blood, and the objects on the branches the tithes that the congregants offered. The leading man stood and stood by the shore, raising his arms and hands to the sky, his legs spread. His companion approached, carrying the helmet, and handed it to him. The officiant placed it on his head and began to sing the same litany as the others, but raising his voice until he led them, singing in a voice of intense anguish, as if reciting a tragedy by Euripides, with the words "nei ambé, nei ambé, nei ambé" repeated over and over again. So many times that it became another sound of that place, a song that was earth and water at the same time, a penetrating song of the flesh, like syllables of bone and sounds that flowed with the liquidity of blood. Then the head with the helmet lowered abruptly, as if in sorrow, but it was really an affirmative gesture, a saying yes to the sacrifice that was already consummated a second later. The companion next to him pierced him with a flint stick and threw him into the stream. A faint phosphorescent light seemed to rise from the now stagnant water.

And the body, which seemed dead, moved again. It raised its head, still wearing its helmet, its torso supported by its hands resting on the mud of the bank, and then its legs, allowing it to stand upright in front of the campfire.

It was a white man.

In his dirty face, I recognized Colonel Berg.

5

Not long after watching that recording, I received news about the new lunar project. Colonel Sanchez immediately came to mind. I didn't even know if he was still alive, and where. But like everyone in that city and with that profession, they couldn't stray too far from Washington. Military personnel never cease to be drawn to politics, and even if they lack the

intelligence to navigate that jungle of appearances, they always hope for someone to lend a hand, through thick and thin. Sánchez, as a military man and as a member of a community that continued to be marginalized despite so much progress, was one of them. I called him at his old number on Benjamin Franklin Street. His voice, which I remembered so well, answered: slow, mellifluous, sometimes languid, so inappropriate for a military man, in my opinion. I think he was surprised to hear me want to see him, since we, my mother and I, had practically kicked him out of the house due to his constant insistence on helping us. We didn't realize, at that moment, that perhaps we were the ones helping him. He was a lonely man who had lost his only friend, and whose wife he was platonically in love with.

He showed up at home the next day. He was old, gaunt, dressed in rather shabby civilian clothes. He had lost his hair, and his dark complexion and sparse white hair made him resemble an old Indian from a now-vanished tribe.

"How are you, Roger?" he said in Spanish.

"Fine, Colonel, thank you for coming."

He entered the house, looking at the living room where he had spent so many hours. He sat down on the old sofa, on the exact same cushion. His face seemed to be renewed with joy, and he looked toward the kitchen door, as if he expected to see my mother emerge.

"This house brings back many memories, and I've become a melancholic old man."

"Forgive me for bothering you, Colonel, but I read about the new lunar project, and I immediately remembered you."

He looked at me questioningly.

"I have some questions to ask you about my father's trip."

"Not again, Roger. That trip killed your father and destroyed the lives of many since then, including mine..."

"Actually, I wanted to ask you about Colonel Berg. I'm interested in learning more about him...what he was like, how he got along with my father..."

"Well, Berg was stubborn, but his stubbornness wasn't due to intelligence, but to hide his inability. He had a hard time with physical training because he was the grandson, son, and brother of soldiers, even the women." His family members were the first to join the forces when they accepted women's enlistment. It made it difficult for him to understand how what was then a new technology worked...

"And why did they accept him then?"

"Because of what I already said, because of his family. His father, above all, was a hero in World War II, winning more than one medal for valor in Europe and Africa."

"Was he in Africa? In which country?"

"I don't remember, Roger, but he fought there when the Germans invaded that continent for a while."

"Did he die then?"

"No, he returned home safe and sound, telling anecdotes about the Black people who saved his life. Of course, no one believed him; everyone praised him as the greatest hero, almost comparing him to MacArthur. Women threw themselves at him, and when he finally married, he lived a cloistered life in Washington, devoted to his family."

I remained silent for a while, thinking, putting things in their place.

"What did he look like?"

"Which, father or son?"

"Both," I answered, knowing what was emerging in my mind at that moment, but I couldn't expect Sánchez to understand.

"Well, typical Americans, of medium to tall height, almost blond hair, slender, and toned bodies. Almost like Robert Redford, if you'd seen him in the movies. Perfect beings, but arrogant. In the son's case, that arrogance was unfounded; he was a simple office soldier who rose quickly through the ranks thanks to his grandfather's influence, since his father died after being admitted to a hospital, where no one was allowed to visit him, due to pneumonia, as they said later. They held a military funeral with all the appropriate pomp. I was at the funeral, and I saw the son standing next to the coffin as it was lowered into the grave with the American flag draped over it." A worthy son of a soldier, with all the elegance and pomp expected of him. It's strange, but now that I think about it, he was so similar to the old man that it was like seeing him standing over his own grave. He even seemed to have aged a little since his father's sudden illness.

Colonel Sánchez stayed for dinner. During the meal, we continued talking. I felt sorry for him, I felt the affection my father must have had for him. He had always been a helpless being, even as a young man. He was dependent on my family, on what we did, on what we thought. Now he did the same to me, and it was my crime to take advantage of it to obtain the information I needed.

"How did he and my father get along?"

Sánchez put his cutlery aside, wiped his lips with his napkin, and looked at me as if he were seeing them right then and there in my eyes.

"I accompanied your father many times during the months of training. I admired him for his ability to overcome difficulties." He had more endurance than I imagined, not being a military man, but those trips to such remote places had seasoned him admirably. He equaled Berg in that, but surpassed him in technical training. They got along well at first, but with a month to go before takeoff, I saw them argue several times, and Captain Williams would leave the scene. "He could have made the entire

trip alone," he said. "When the captain asked for Berg to be replaced due to his ineptitude, it was your father who intervened on his behalf."

"And why were they arguing?"

"I don't know. They always lowered their voices when they saw me coming, but the strange thing is that despite that, they were closer than before, although always angry with each other, murmuring and competing. I wanted to find out what was wrong with your father, but I couldn't get him to tell me anything. Then came the trip..."

Colonel Sánchez left after offering him a whiskey after dinner. He hugged me before walking away along the sidewalk well into the night, brushing the walls of the houses with his old raincoat, the same one he wore over his military uniform when he visited my mother.

Several months passed, and it was almost a year later that I received acceptance for a postgraduate course at Cambridge thanks to the thesis I sent along with my resume. My father had taught there as a visiting professor for several years, and that undoubtedly had an influence, but above all, the thesis, which I must confess, was a variation on one of the unpublished studies among the papers I found in the library. Both my mother and I had refused the insistent requests for unpublished material from the universities, institutes, and journals with which he regularly collaborated. The advances on contracts for two unfinished books were taken to court for a couple of years, then settled by mutual agreement. All unpublished material, handwritten or filmed, was first defended by my mother, who would have wanted to burn them if she had not recognized the value they had for the economic future of our small family in case we needed help to sustain the process againstto the government; then I was the one who kept him within these four walls.

When I had everything ready to travel to Cambridge, the house already locked, my suitcases packed, and my passport in good condition, I got a call from the US Congress. The letterhead was already intimidating. I wondered if the reason was the lunar flight that had ended two months earlier, with relative success. I had heard from the press and television about the takeoff, the days spent on the moon, and the astronauts' return to Earth. One of them had been Captain Williams's nephew. The day I sat in front of the television to watch the live broadcast from the moon, seeing the three identical figures of the astronauts enclosed in their suits, I imagined what I hadn't been able to see when I was so young: Williams, Berg, and my father. Now one of them had the same last name as one of the others, and the moon was the same, and the technology almost the same. The emptiness of space didn't change, nor did the inner emptiness of the men traveling. Perhaps that's why Dad had wanted to make that trip, not out of professional ambition, not even the most valid scientific curiosity, but out of an imperative and desperate need to fill the emptiness he had already observed in his ancestors. If, therefore, he couldn't find the soul in the countless bones he had rescued from the Earth, at least he could try somewhere else in the universe, in some lunar rock, in the atmosphere

whose different conditions might conceal something different, projecting within it a hint more akin to the divine than the human. He had seen how certain factors, sterile in certain parts of the world, are fertile in others depending on the conditions. Life develops unexpectedly in the most unexpected places. In that respect, my father had never ceased to be an idealist until the day he died.

I showed up at one of the offices in Congress. The room smelled of history, antique furniture, with paintings of well-known and unknown politicians on the walls. Everyone waiting for me greeted me warmly. There were three men, and the secretary, who obsequiously offered me whatever I wanted.

"Mr. Levi, I'm the district attorney, and those accompanying me are Captain Scott Williams, who just returned from the trip to the moon, and General Nichols, in charge of the original project."

I shook hands with each of them, and they invited me to sit down. I sensed something wasn't right.

"You look worried, Roger, and excuse me for calling you that, but I see you as a son to me," the general said. "I knew your father, and I admired him greatly."

I nodded and thanked him. The district attorney spoke again.

"We know you've decided to pursue the same field of study as your father, and that's why we called you, because we want to show you a recording that Captain Williams brought us from his trip."

I looked at the captain closely for the first time. He didn't resemble his father, not so much in appearance, but in demeanor. He seemed shy, scared.

"But there are many eminent figures in the discipline; I'm just starting out..."

"Roger," said the general, "what we want to show you concerns only us... It goes without saying that when you leave here, you must maintain confidentiality."

I looked at the prosecutor.

"That's right, Mr. Levi. That's why I'm here."

Then the general stood up, went to a closet, and opened the doors. Inside was a large screen and video equipment. He took the remote control and returned to the table.

"This footage was taken by Captain Williams twenty-four hours before his return, while he was exploring the surface of the moon. He was alone, so the other two crew members know nothing about what he filmed."

He pressed the play button, and the screen was filled with images of the moon. The camera must have been on the helmet of Williams' suit, since it moved with his steps across the uneven surface. At first, there was nothing but a region of gray rocks and black sky. At one point, it stopped, turned,

and the capsule could be seen on the lunar surface, along with the other two crew members exploring the surroundings. As they returned to the vaster, emptier area, the footsteps became monotonous, so much so that the few minutes of footage seemed to last much longer. Then Williams stopped. Something appeared on the ground, still far away, something small that seemed to be moving in jumps. The captain approached, and suddenly he was just a few meters from an animal.

It was a white rabbit with a slight grayish tinge. An ordinary rabbit that moved its ears and snout, sniffing at the stranger from a distance. The recording seemed to pause because it didn't move for several seconds; the captain's astonishment must have paralyzed him. A rabbit on the surface of the moon, it must have been said, was dreaming or under the psychological effects of trauma. to an unknown person. The rabbit then hopped several times in front of the camera, several meters away, moving away in the opposite direction, and Williams then began to chase it.

For a moment, I thought I was watching a black-and-white silent film from the early twentieth century, a comic fantasy film, perhaps by Lumiere. I looked at my companions in case I saw evidence of a practical joke on their faces. But I was in the United States Congress, and everything that was happening to me was real.

The camera and Williams chased the rabbit, which was quickly escaping, and suddenly the captain fell to the floor and the recording was interrupted. General Nichols turned off the screen, and the three of them looked at me.

"What do you think about that, Mr. Levi?" the prosecutor asked me.

More than astonished, I was perplexed, and although I didn't want to admit it, moved for reasons still unclear.

"Special effects, no doubt."

"Nothing like that. We've already checked with the experts. Besides, now you'll see something else."

The general stood up and left through a side door. A few seconds later, he returned with a box in his hands. He placed it on the table and said:

"Captain Williams brought this. He caught it after several attempts."

He removed the cloth covering the box. It was glass, and inside was a rabbit, undoubtedly the rabbit they had found on the moon. I was standing right in front of it, a few inches from the glass cage with the animal inside. I circled the table, circling the cage, while the rabbit moved slowly, scared, perhaps on the way to death from the confinement or the uncertain atmosphere.

"We have it in that cage with a proportion of gases similar to those on the moon; otherwise, it would die."

I knelt on the floor, resting my arms on the table and my chin on my arms. I gazed at the animal in ecstasy, and the rabbit approached the glass wall I

had approached, and I gazed into its small, black eyes. But I recognized the look I had last seen more than fifteen years before.

It was my father, I told myself, and I thought I was going completely mad. Because it was beautiful to feel this way, being in the right place at the right time for the first time, with the person I finally needed to be with.

I imagined his last minutes, walking away from the capsule, to meet with Berg later, in keeping with the meeting they must have planned before takeoff. We'll meet on the moon, somewhere far from the capsule's cameras. We'll talk, and you'll tell me the secret. Perhaps that's why I had insisted that Berg be one of the crew, a kind of extortion in which Berg would keep his deal: reveal the secret of the resurrection in exchange for my father's silence. Berg's body had died, and yet there it was after all this time. The African tribe's ritual still hid its secret, and my father needed to know it.

Had they fought alone on the surface of the moon? I wondered. What would that final confrontation have been like between two types of ambition, one intellectual, in tune with the desperation to find the meaning of life, the other with the fear of dying again? Two kinds of knowledge fighting to prevail.

I contemplated my father's eyes in that animal that watched me still, recognizing me, calling me. My father had finally learned the secret, and yet he couldn't enjoy the merit of his discovery. I wondered if that was what he was seeking, or simply knowledge, the immeasurable knowledge of his avid, never-satiated mind.

I saw that he was suffering, and would suffer even more locked in that glass cell.

So I grabbed the paperweight from the table and smashed it against the cage. The glass shattered, and the rabbit darted out and jumped onto the carpeted floor. Those with me grabbed me, but they didn't prevent me from seeing the death of the rabbit, as it suffocated in its death throes on the carpet. Its small eyes looked at me, and I uttered the pair of words in the Hamba dialect that would never again have any effect on my father, a pair of words that were like two stuffed museum pieces.

MEN WITH CURVED BACKS

1

Anyone looking through the windows of the large hospital building might see a spectacle, if not strange, at least interesting for those unaccustomed to witnessing the daily scenes and dramas of such places. The large, multi-story building with its white facade is beyond the extensive park that separates it from the impenetrable granite walls, protected by advanced security systems. Even though the park is populated by enormous trees of many kinds and genres: aromos, jacarandas, palo borrachos, avocados,

palm trees, apple trees, lemon trees, and there are bushes that seem determined to try to prevent the passage of the narrow paths that lead to the doors, adorned with enormous exotic flowers, brought by the same doctors on their trips to exhausting daysScientists in remote parts of the world. Even so, the darkness of the night over the adjoining park heightens the intensity of the illuminated windows on various floors.

And in a section of the second floor corresponding to the main pavilion, the casual, thoughtful passerby walking along the sidewalk next to the wall would have seen, after shrill screams and the shattering of glass had caught their attention, the silhouetted figure of a pregnant woman on the edge of the window, the glass partially broken and stained with blood obstructing the view of what is happening inside.

Shadows interpose themselves between the woman and the yellowish-white wall of the hallway, the doctors' lab coats made out on those wings that loom over the window, trying to stop, or perhaps pounce on, the figure on the edge of the abyss. In the tall shadows of withered wheat ears, like old queen birds, the figures of the nurses with their caps can also be made out. They carry swords, perhaps syringes filled with magical substances, instead of the ancient vessels containing effective poisons. Times change, but women continue to wear the veil of death and life, rejecting it and then submissively resigning themselves. Proud and tenacious, desperate and yet strong, like madness.

That woman at the window, her belly swollen, surely about to give birth, screams because she doesn't want to be caught. Her arms move in the air against the broken glass, as if she were sailing in a sea of turbulent waters. Her gaze resembles shattered glass, broken and lost. She had been drugged minutes before, almost certainly, but her nervous system had temporarily overcome the barriers posed by the tranquilizers. Her consciousness was lost, but her subconscious was so excited that she no longer knew that what she wanted to avoid could actually happen to her.

And here we enter the mind of Sara Levi. The passerby returns to his dull daily life, ignoring the screams coming from the hospital. If he's a man, he's already heard them; if he's a woman, he knows what pain it's about, and what the probable internal conflicts of this crazy woman trying to escape the inevitable are. The person on the sidewalk turns his gaze to the concrete he's walking on, his head bowed, forced by the enormous hump that has overcome him since birth. He no longer sees what's happening outside the window. The woman faints, screaming that she doesn't want her child taken out: she wants to see it born, she mutters, as she falls asleep in the arms of two men, the doctors' assistants. The woman's hump fits into the hollow between the arms of one of them, and the other helps his companion, finding the weight of his own humps odious but unavoidable. The doctors adjust their scrubs, their collars raised over their humps, and the beautiful nurses walk with their shoulders slumped under the weight of their humps. They've taken her to her room, and she's already asleep. Immersed in a half-sleep where the times of her life and the characters of her story blend together. She remembers what she's been screaming since they forced her to leave her apartment in the city and dragged her to the

hospital to give birth to her baby. "I don't want them to take my child away from me," she kept saying. And the doctors and administrative staff tried to tell her that wasn't her intention; they would give her back the child once it's born. But Sara wanted to see the child emerge from her womb and not lose sight of it at any moment. Then the figure of her husband, Roger Levi, appears in the dream with all the peace that has always characterized him. His attitude is firm and peaceful at the same time, serene and self-assured. But she knows his inner self, is aware of his fears. His seemingly calm demeanor stems from an attitude of wonder and pessimism about the world, a thoughtful and always suspicious position. From a family of scientists for several generations, that constant feeling of doubt is present in his body. Questions without answers. Roger is an anthropologist, a profession that is not very profitable these days. If it weren't for the income and the family inheritance, he would never have been able to dedicate the time he has to his research. He made many trips, especially before marrying Sara, and has shown her the documentary images and old cryptograms of ancient civilizations. However, an obsession has dominated him ever since he met him. Roger thinks that men must have had a different figure than ours. He says he is certain, because of the old skeletons he found in the ruins of museums destroyed two centuries ago, that men had a slender and upright figure. The hump that characterizes us did not exist or was much smaller, and the shoulders were held upright. The head could be held high, making it easy and common to raise one's eyes to the sky or myHe could move easily to the sides or back.

Sara had laughed the first time she heard him, and despite the old images and photographs he had taken in the ruins, she didn't understand them, and so it was as if he were talking to her about fantasies. They both sat in the apartment's dining room, sitting on backless chairs, elbows bent until their hands almost touched their shoulders, leaning on the table while they ate. Their heads moved with difficulty, and migraines were as common as the need to breathe. The television played twenty-four hours a day, surrounding the apartment from wall to wall, and every ten minutes the familiar painkiller commercial was repeated like a chant. Then they got up from the table and went to the bedroom, where the television followed them. When they undressed, they sometimes looked in the mirror at the protruding vertebrae on their backs, often with chafed skin. Then they would smear each other's backs with an ointment that television also advertised every day. Then they would lie down and try to make love, finding the erotic caresses on their humps and the kisses on their sunken breasts uncomfortable. And when this happened, only sometimes, they both felt, without conveying it or daring to name what they didn't know how to name, and with the fear of losing that indecipherable sensation forever, an almost certainty that there was something more behind his sad, human figure.

Only in those moments did she come to see how the idea of Roger was settling in her mind, almost without a hint of absurdity. Such was the way he spoke to her, so convinced was he of what he said, and yet he knew he couldn't prove it unless he continued investigating in the right places, delving into the ruins of ancient temples that governments had destroyed

or hidden with false relics to mislead unbelieving anthropologists like himself. Because it was true that for more than two hundred years, history had been intended to be forgotten, like a disease that provoked nostalgia and sadness. Museums slowly disappeared; the media became permanent transmitters of forgotten contemporary news as soon as it was known. There were no records beyond the last ten years. They weren't needed for the flow of daily life.

Sara remembers that on some of those nights, Roger would tell her that when they had a child, he would like it not to be like them, but a normal man or woman. She then stared at him, not understanding. "We're normal," she replied. Her husband laughed, and Sara felt mocked. "Don't be angry," he tried to console her, "we're normal for our time. But humans aren't born like that, like we are. Our child will have a straight back."

"How could that be, if we were going to be his parents?" she thought, without asking him. But he, reading the doubt in her eyes, told her that something had happened in the world, that memory was being lost, but that the human body still retained the true memory of its structure. He told her about births. He asked her if she remembered anything from her life before she was two or three years old. "No one remembers that," she replied. "And how is it possible that our parents don't remember us at our birth either? It's the quarantine, my dear, it's always been that way, to protect babies from environmental pollution."

Roger laughed and stopped trying to continue the conversation. He said that one of those days he would be going on a trip, and Sara, who was already used to it, didn't even ask where. She fell asleep thinking about the things she would pack in Roger's suitcase, since he, always so intelligent when it came to important matters, was absent-minded when it came to trivial matters.

In the dream, dizzying images of plane rides over high mountain ranges mingled, but it was she who was traveling now, and the plane was like a long, narrow hospital corridor through which she was taken to that terrible accident where the plane crashed into a mountain, and she then entered a torrid, sandy area. Her mouth and body filled with sand, and she felt nothing but heaviness and sleepiness, and then a light that gave her warmth. She saw strange faces, those of the many doctors who treated her and spoke to her from the moment she was in that room. And also Roger's face, speaking to the children they would have when she became pregnant. Then Sara began to cry, because she felt guilty again for not having told her husband that she was already pregnant when she left. It wasn't a mean act; she herself didn't know his condition when she saw him off at the airport. A week later, she had the first delay of her life, and she knew it was too late to keep Roger by her side. She promised herself not to use that as an excuse to make him come back; she knew that what had happened was too important to him. He was determined to try. He knew, above all, that if he gave up on that trip, he would never be able to restart that work. Women and children are an obstacle to a man's life, he told himself. Men

are more intellectual than sentimental, which is to say that their apparent coldness is pure insensitivity. They have the thick skin of their intellect, like some women who obscure their visions with the use of pure reason, and only very few are capable of amalgamating both aspects, and these are usually called witches. And that's why they've almost disappeared, some of them hidden, perhaps, in the tunnels of their own conscience.

He suffered and cried every night for the first two months. Then he got used to talking and writing to him without mentioning anything, crying more than usual when he told her about his daily failures, and crying with extreme joy when he recounted some achievement. She never questioned him about her return, and when he wanted to know how she felt, if she was alone, if anyone visited her, if she had resumed her studies of fine arts, she responded by inventing homework exactly the opposite of what she had done, as a kind of aide-memoire, because she was afraid of betraying herself. They would cut off the connection, and Sara would stare for a while at the empty, dark monitor, wondering what the child she would have would be like. Now something confirmed the suspicion Roger had planted inside her, which was growing like the child he had also planted in her body. Somehow, she would have to see her son at the very moment of his birth. How could she achieve this? she wondered as she turned off the monitor for good before going to bed, so she could continue thinking. But the baby's bumps and kicks inside her, along with the nausea, allowed her to distance herself from those thoughts, which, while intellectual, were more painful due to their share of uncertainty and probable grief. The aches and pains of her body and the daily grind comforted her because she knew they would end one day.

She needed to prepare for that moment.

She woke with a start and a scream. She opened her eyes and saw two nurses, one at her bedside, holding her left arm tightly, the other a few feet away, preparing a syringe. She touched her belly and felt relieved to find her child hadn't been born yet. She still had time, she told herself. They had taken her from her home as they always did, the day before the exact days of her pregnancy cycle. Sometimes they performed a cesarean section, other mothers gave birth spontaneously. But for all of them, the procedure was the same: anesthesia before or after. For more than 150 years, no one had ever met their children until after the quarantine period following birth.

"Please let me go..." she thought she was screaming, because her voice echoed in the walls of her skull with greater intensity than it actually had. The nurses' gaze, with their impeccably white caps and neat uniforms, was one of absolute indifference. The one farthest away approached, and while the other, sitting next to the bed, held Sara's arm extended on the sheet, inserted the needle into a vein in the crook of her elbow. When she saw her dead doll's face—for that was the image that came to Sara at that moment, like those drawings she sketched as a child that led her parents to believe she would be a great artist—she felt a chill as she discovered the immense mass of the nurse's hump rise behind her bowed head. Then it was like waking up just at the moment when the tranquilizing substance was

supposed to begin to take effect. It was an internal force that had been developing since her husband's departure, as the gestation period progressed. Could the analogy be so simple and obvious? The child gestating within her was also, and above all, an idea that sought to spread its roots throughout her body, invading her brain with ancient, unknown, absurd ideas, penetrating her chest to make her feel sensations and spirits, perhaps true feelings that sprang from human intellect itself. Many times she had heard the phrases Roger said to her, having heard them himself from his parents or grandparents, scholars like him. Phrases that had been in books that no longer existed. Emotion through the intellect has the firmness and weakness of the thought that forms it. That was why Roger had told her not to stop training her manual skills for painting and drawing. He had promised her that when he returned from the trip, from which he expected the full revelation of the human past as men with straight backs, she would be in charge of illustrating the great book he would write. Perhaps it would be several volumes over the years, while he was busy deciphering the secrets of the ancient bones. By reading through technique and intuition in those fragments of human beings, she would sketch the figures as he described them.

Thus, after his departure, Sara didn't need her husband's voice urging her to draw, nor giving her figures and measurements of the forms and figures of ancient humans. Only a short time later, when her belly was already more than five months pregnant, she began to look for paper and pencil first, and then she rescued from a broken suitcase the tools she had used long before for painting: the palette, the oil paint, the canvases. She set up easels and supported the frames with blank canvases. She copied the sketches she had developed in the drafts, but later she no longer needed to make sketches. The figures of the ancients emerged quickly on the canvases, one after the other, without correcting them, without looking at them once finished. She knew herself to be possessed by something indecipherable in its origin, terrifying if she sat down for even a second to think about it. That's why she didn't stop painting until she was truly tired and certain that sleep would come immediately after bedtime. And in her dreams, she found more new, bold images, and it distressed her all the time in between when she had to preserve them in her consciousness so they wouldn't be erased until the moment she got up and sat down again in front of her canvases. Sometimes it wasn't even dawn, and when a new painting had been finished, light streamed in through the windows she hadn't closed the night before. Some people came to visit her, spied on Sara's work through those windows, and since they didn't understand those monsters she was drawing, they began to worry. They greeted her, and she barely paid any attention to them. She had lost weight, except for her baby bump. Employees from the Ministry of Health came to visit her. She greeted them with all the kindness of her well-learned politeness, and spoke clearly and rationally about the complaints they had received from Sara's neighbors and friends, prompted, of course, by the obvious concern of those interested in her, the unborn child, and the father when she returned.

They asked her if she knew when she would return, since she had left only vague information in the customs records. Sara replied that she didn't

know. They insisted, implying that the deadline should not be later than the birth of the child. She would not say anything about her secret.

Months later, they arrived at the house while she was sleeping. She woke up in an ambulance taking her to the hospital where she was now, thrashing around to make it clear to the medical staff that she was not willing to give in to the effects of the drugs. What moved in her body was something more beautiful than all of them, the figure of an upright, slender man, who, as he grew, would look down on them from his formidable height, contemplating with pitiful sorrow the enormous hump they carried like ancient beetles.

The nurses began to worry. They talked among themselves, looking at her from a few feet away from the bed, the light from the window surrounding their silhouettes making them pathetically ignorant of what was happening to their patient. They passed the vial from one to another, looking at the label against the light, thinking they might have given the wrong drug. Then one left the room, and the other remained watching Sara's movements on the bed, as she tried to untie herself from the restraints. What was the nurse thinking? She told herself, perhaps that she was crazy, and that it might be necessary not to return the child to her at the end of the quarantine. Then she was afraid, because if she wanted to keep her son from the very beginning, she had to play by the rules.

When the doctor entered the room, she was already calm, but lucid. The man, an elderly doctor she'd seen upon arriving, strolling the halls surrounded by younger ones, sat on the bed and took her right hand.

"Sara, how are you feeling?"

"Not well, doctor. I've told everyone, from the beginning, that I don't want to be put to sleep. I want to see my son from the moment of birth. I want to follow him with my eyes the whole time..."

She had stopped, as she seemed short of breath, perhaps due to the effect of the medication, which, despite not yet acting on her conscious nervous system, had already made its way into her autonomic nervous system.

"Calm down, Sara. Your wish is truly commendable, and I confess it's been a long time since I was a student, which is already a long time, and only from women giving birth to their fourth or fifth children. Women who had a different education, who had heard their mothers' stories, surely." "But not me, doctor. My mother didn't tell me anything about what I looked like when I was born. I wondered, many times, if I wasn't adopted..."

The old man laughed heartily.

"This isn't the first time I've heard this fear, Sara. But nothing is more ridiculous." for the times we live in. You already know that quarantine is a preventative measure for both the child and the parents and their families. Newborns must be monitored and protected from any contamination they may encounter in their home environment.

"But, doctor, all that's very well, but we've known for years that these are simple procedures. My husband says that any genetic disease can be

detected with prior studies, and also the home environment, you know, doctor, the houses are protected, cleaned, and monitored by the Ministry of Health before and after each birth."

"I'm glad you know so much, and since you mentioned your husband, I know he belongs to an educated family, who hasn't lost their study habits and formidable sense of curiosity. I also know that they've found a lot of dirt in your house, the result of your love of painting. I've been shown photos, and they are undoubtedly true works of art, especially for their originality." When I saw them, I wondered how you could have imagined such deformed figures…

This time it was she who laughed. Her face seemed to light up for the first time since she'd arrived. The nurse winced in displeasure and abruptly left the room.

"Forgive me for the young lady's lack of manners, Sara. As I told you, these are different times and we are different men."

"Then you, doctor, know more than you're telling me. Don't play with me, and above all, don't treat me like another ignorant woman." Sara's gaze shifted toward the door that had just closed.

The old man stood up and paced around the room, his hump weighing on his back, weakened by arthritis, and his weak legs. He raised his head as much as he could to look at the open curtains, letting in the light that shone on the medicine carts. He lifted some bottles with his hands, his fingers crooked, obviously in pain, but expert hands that didn't let the pills fall. He struggled to read the labels, furrowed his brow as he strained behind his glasses, jutting his toothless jaw slightly in the effort, his entire face engaged in comprehending what he was trying to read. Surely he couldn't do it anymore, and this whole procedure was just an excuse to stall for time. Something else was roaring in his conscience, undoubtedly more lucid than the entire flimsy structure of his body, which was imminently collapsing. He went to the window, raised his arms as high as he could, releasing the latch holding the curtains, and suddenly darkness took over the room. Then he looked for the ventilation slits at the baseboards. He bent down to close them, and the murmur of the hallways, already indistinguishable to accustomed ears, disappeared like the sound of a faucet suddenly turning off. He then walked to the bedroom door and closed it. Pressing a button on the communicator, he asked the nurses' office not to disturb him.

Sara was afraid. Something unusual was about to happen. It was simultaneously something that excited her, something that gave her a glimmer of hope, but she also knew that her entire future lay in the hands of that old doctor.

"Sara, my dear..." the old man's voice pronounced as he approached the bed. He sat down beside her, and she smelled the scent of old people, as if with this whole ritual, he had shed the masks that protected him and had become what he truly was: a man whose imminent death was not far off, and the truth was a pleasure that needed to be satisfied.

The old man's voice now seemed to come from a sounding board, with a faint echo that didn't distort the words, but rather gave them greater meaning because they were delayed, as if they had had time to reflect on themselves, to surround their meaning with consonances foreign to their natural origin. Almost gathering all the meanings or significations they had ever had in any language or dialect in the history of the world. Perhaps, Sara thought, a man's voice is the sounding board for all the voices of the past, and she even thought she could distinguish echoes of Roger's voice, or that of his father, whom she had barely known. An old man who had died of cancer at the age of fifty-five, leaving his son an entire library that was expropriated the day the employees of the faculty where he worked came to pay their respects to the family. There was no choice, Roger said. Three generations of anthropologists had disappeared along with that library. Now the doctor was barely, and very slowly, approaching the closed walls and doors of that lost world.

"At least a generation before I was born, the problems began. I don't know exactly what the cause was. I do know, however, that the hundreds of theses written on the subject were actually justifications created to lend credibility to the new law, which took, they say, almost fifty years to be passed." It took until it was approved. An autonomous and uniform government had to be established, a de facto government elected by the people, so that it could finally be approved in the Senate.

"What are you talking about?" Sara asked impatiently.

"About the pain, dear, the pain in the shoulders and neck. About the migraines and the mobility difficulties in the arms of more and more people around the world." It was something that began to worry the authorities of all governments, because it began to lead to increasingly frequent and extensive sick leave. People affected by these difficulties applied for pensions, and industry and commerce, in addition to all professions, began to suffer losses. The economy suffered as a result of all this. But what worried everyone most was the frequent births with brachial paralysis, that is, babies' arms due to injuries to the nerve plexus in the armpit.

The old man asked Sara to raise an arm and touched her hidden armpit, compressed by the remnants of her hardened shoulders.

"There were many studies, both for self-interest and commercial purposes, and many more serious ones. The latter were dubious in their conclusions; they couldn't completely agree that the cause of the injuries was a single one. They said it was the type of work, work-related stress, a sedentary lifestyle, even the slow transformation of the vertebrae following the supine position of ancient man when he came down from the trees and adapted to the plains, standing on two legs, to which he was unaccustomed. The weight of the head, increasingly developed over the centuries by intelligence, moved faster than the strength of the vertebrae and muscles of the neck and back. Then the studies and theses I just mentioned began to appear." In short, they said that the clavicle bone compressed the nerve roots of the cervical and brachial plexuses, and that this caused the multiple nervous difficulties in what doctors and anatomists call the

shoulder girdle. Preventive removal of the clavicle at birth was therefore recommended.

Sara was beginning to understand, or rather, to see clearly what her husband had already explained to her in terms she hadn't understood before. She wondered why the doctor was telling her all this.

"You know you're risking being reported, Doctor."

"I know, Sara, but I'm not speaking to just any patient, but to the wife of Professor Roger Levi, a doctor in anthropology, a fourth-generation anthropologist and forensic physician. I know my name won't mean anything to you, but I was a professor of your husband's father many years ago. We were teacher and student, but I was very young then, and only a few years separated us." I was deeply sorry for Roger's father's premature death; I even made arrangements with his doctors to ensure he received better care in his final hours. Roger probably doesn't remember me; I was a little different than he sees me now, aged by this arthritis that's killing me. I'm twisting like a spider slowly dying.

Evening was falling outside the hospital, the shadow of every tree in the park invading the walls, as if driving cold darts into the walls, as if the past of the old medieval battles suddenly returned, using their large trunks to knock down the doors of that palace where doctors were kings. Because somehow the way the world lived and died was their decision.

"But these humps, doctor, weigh more than any pain..."

"That's what you think, my dear Sara. How can you prove it if you've never had any other way of life? Do I even know the pain of cancer, even though I've known hundreds of sufferers?" "So you agree with these measures, which seem mutilating to me now that I understand them?"

"I was never in a position to judge the decrees already established before my birth. Before any study, Sara, what we received seems completely natural. Now that I'm old, I think about all this, and I can't even have the satisfaction of being sure. What would happen if we didn't do it anymore? What would the next generation be like? Covered in pain, perhaps, or perhaps our dominators..."

"Or grateful beings, doctor. It's up to the parents to educate them... but if they take them away from us and remove their clavicles, they become formless beings like us, defeated from birth by the future hump that could already be seen if we wanted. I speak of us being submissive, doctor. Roger has spoken to me about this. Governments, politics, the powers that be, become eternal when they find the right means of submission. And what's worse than a heavy weight on one's back? No one can bear that for long, and resistance dissolves."

-Has your husband taught you all of this? You are privileged, my dear. When he returns, if they let him, he will be proud of his son.

"I won't let them operate on my son, doctor. My husband's son will be a normal man."

"He won't be able to, Sara. He can't fight."

"Then help me, please..."

"Me?" The old man got out of bed. "I'm about to retire, and it's the only way I can receive the medication for the torture of my arthritis. At least I want to die without pain if I have to writhe like an insect in a hospital bed."

Sara was crying now, and it was as if all the morphine she had resisted suddenly took effect in her body. She quickly sank into sleep as the old man opened the windows and doors. The dimness of the room was now in her own body, immersed in an artificial peace in which her son stirred, restless, disturbed by dreams of his next life.

2

I'd like to have a son, Roger told himself as he flew toward the Atlantic Ocean coast in what had been the territory of Buenos Aires more than two centuries before. Now, that border no longer belonged to anyone, as flooding had caused the dense population of the former province to flee to the southern regions. His mind traveled through the many possibilities of inheritance. What would his child be like, assuming it was a boy, he wondered. First, he thought about his physical appearance, the shape of his face, the color of his eyes, the tone of his hair, and his build. And the smile that had imperceptibly formed on his face suddenly disappeared when he remembered that he would also have the same hump as his and his mother, the same one they all had. But he knew that this wasn't necessarily the case. He was a descendant of three generations of anthropologists for good reason, and even though he didn't have even a third of the knowledge that his ancestors had mastered and discovered, he knew enough to deduce that men weren't born with such a deformity. At first, it was like an intuition he couldn't define for a long time. It was something absurd to his understanding at the time. The human hump was as characteristic of the species as having two legs and two arms. Then he studied the human anatomy that was officially taught to him in the state-subsidized compulsory education institutes, seeing that the human spine was an incongruous curve in its inclinations. Somehow, through reasoning, he understood that the excessive kyphosis of the dorsal area must be compensated by greater cervical and lumbar lordosis, thus restoring the balance of the upright position. It was impossible for man to have evolved toward bipedalism if he couldn't, at the same time, remain standing for more than two hours at a time due to the weight of the upper half of his body pushing him forward. Why, he had wondered a few years ago, did human beings walk on two legs if they weren't able to simultaneously raise their heads high enough to see what was in front of them? He didn't even consider that they could see what lay a little above the line of an imaginary horizon. State teachings were inconsistent with reason, not only scientific or philosophical, but even with common sense. The only time he had dared to ask about such a concern during one of his classes, the professor had

looked at him strangely for more than thirty seconds, his chest heaving and his hump moving almost in time with his heart. He was an old man, and when Roger stood boastfully in the classroom, waiting for an answer that screamed its absence with every passing second, he had a brief glimpse of pity in his chest, like an ancestral reminiscence that taught him more than all the years he spent in state institutions. The old professor's expression of weariness dropped from one second to the next, and the entire weight of his hunchback was a burden of guilt and ignorance he no longer seemed to know how to bear with dignity. Therefore, the man opted for a pretense born of resentment, and a patina of hatred in his gaze. Roger saw, in the bright classroom, full of large windows, with fresh air that carried the scent of the countryside through devices installed on the ceilings, as if all teaching were a mere throwback to nature, to paganism, to the mythical man of the caves and the countryside, who didn't question life or death, who didn't think about heaven or hell, who worked to live until his dying day without knowing anything more than the cycles of the seasons. Only irreparable illnesses, with the only difference that now they could be counteracted with medicines that were stocked in stores simply by mentioning the symptoms. The professor then sat down behind his desk, took a deep breath, as if he were having a heart attack, and began typing on his printer keyboard. He didn't reply, and Roger sat back down until the class was over. It was finished. Later that same day, a written reprimand addressed to his father was sent to his house. It was in the library room, one of the few that were still kept hidden from the knowledge of the authorities of the Ministry of General Welfare, which was, yes, the name of the agency that administered everything related to the health, education, and economy of the state, and all other aspects of society considered under its jurisdiction. Later, when Roger came of age, that library would disappear, without him ever being able to read even a fifth of its books, not even in the digital format his father had begun transcribing them in as a last resort to save them. All of that vanished one April night fifteen years earlier. During that time, Roger decided to stay away, almost hidden, as if he were a living library seeking to recover itself in the recesses of lost civilizations. And, as he traveled back on the wings of time to this past, spent in the old, cold room filled with books, he remembered the slow, reluctant way his father had accepted the communication from the institute sent in his name. Tearing the envelope with weariness and disdain, he unfolded the poor-quality paper customary for any government matter and began to read. Roger was several feet away from him, sitting in a single armchair, his back to the door through which his mother had entered to deliver the correspondence, not even suspecting that such an envelope was among the letters. He looked sideways, averting his eyes from the book that had captivated him until that moment: the thesis his great-grandfather had submitted for his final exam at the university. The old book must be treated with respect, as it had never been reprinted. And as he carefully closed it, resting it on his lap, he realized his hands were shaking, and he thought about the skeleton of his hands, as if looking at two museum pieces, and he told himself that his great-grandfather's hands were just like his own. Hands that had written the book he was now reading. The past and the present were one, and therefore the future was also one with them,

because implicit in that book about genetics was the birth of the generations that would inevitably arrive later.

His father's voice distracted him.

He told him he had received a notification from the institute, and he was being punished with five days of absence. He knew what that meant; it wasn't the first time he'd been given such a reprimand. His father looked at him from the distance of his desk. His eyes said that every day deducted from official education was equivalent to a lower score, already irretrievable, in the references and reputations that every adult citizen kept in the state archives. Claudio Levi, his father, keeping the same name the men in the family had had two generations earlier—a cyclical custom that someone established as a kind of homage, perhaps, to the cycle of birth-death-birth, key to the entire school of anthropology the Levis had founded —advised his son to get used to giving in from time to time. Men need to feel at ease, especially the mediocre and the ignorant, and they are frightened by what they don't know, afraid of men who ask questions they can't understand, much less answer.

Roger nodded and returned to his reading.

From that day on, he no longer asked unnecessary questions, not because real answers didn't exist, but because no one was there to answer them. He simply wrote down his ideas, his concepts, his conclusions, which became increasingly transient as he learned about the nature of man and his origins in long discussions with his father. Unlike his grandfather, his father had barely been able to go out in search of archaeological evidence and samples. He knew that everything he found would be seized and destroyed by customs or the ministry, with excuses of contamination or because it was considered irrelevant to practical life today. He knew the ministry had him on a kind of blacklist, yet they had limited themselves to monitoring him from a distance, ensuring that his son followed only regular state courses. Certain that they were cultivating his mind for the desert of knowledge, as Claudio Levi called official education, they were able to enjoy a few years of tranquility in the old library hidden in the suburbs, in the house they had converted into one of the warehouses of the docks of the city of Buenos Aires. A nearly uninhabited city, it was still the administrative capital of the entire southern territory of the continent since the beginning of the so-called new electoral dictatorship.

He rubs his face with his hands. Tired from the journey, slowly As if traveling in a four -year -old at the beginning of the twentieth century, the extensive flooded plain looks through the window. Covers and cities covered a hundred years ago by water. Long lands of earth as islands, roads that stand out as varicose veins in the skin of a marine plain. Who knows now where exactly the sea began time before? He knows that there is an elevated sector, beyond the old city of La Plata, where they can land. Glimpse in the distance the high towers of the imperishable cathedral, empty, closed forever from the time of the prohibition. Both to see ... Roger is said, on those closed land, in the basements of the cities, in the debris.

How he would like to explore those sites, how much he would give his life to put his feet in those ruins and take out one layer after another of history.

He would like to have a child again. He has not argued with Sara yet, at least not extensively. She has understood, and he knows, the need to end that pending debt that she acquired in the long talks with her father. The origin of the hump is not the origin of man, he used to say. The human body implies many possibilities, including that of Giba. Every spine is susceptible to deform and overcome. But it was not so for centuries, the books say it, the old photos, the illustrations, the skeletons found a few meters from the surface. Roger has seen the books and schemes of the erect man, the man with straight back.

Many doctors know the truth, his father had told him. But they have convinced themselves with arguments shaped by the picana. Mental lagoons have formed in the civilization of today's man.

How to explain this to Sara? Roger thought many times. That is why he had to go by little by little what for him were assurances with the forms of suspicion and doubt. Opening his mind slowly, until he saw her trust him to let him leave and recover the evidence that many others made disappear. He had let him go on a research trip, but he suspected that he had done more for love than for true confidence in what he said. It didn't matter already. Soon it would land, it was possible to see the sea, the true sea that flooded with huge waves the coasts of the legendary Pampas plain. The rising sun illuminating the silver surface, firing flashes to the plane, as if it wanted to tear it down, because it was a dead bird that however flew. Moviean corpse, like the minds of men who had used to travel in them for a long time.

The plane has landed in a field of what was once the city of La Plata. Now it is an extensive plain with large areas flooded around the city's ruins. The old cathedral still rises in the center of the innumerable diagonals that characterized their urban center for almost four hundred years. But from just over half of the time he was depopulated because of the floods. The river that overflowed in the long and rainy winters, the erosion of the beaches and the advance of the sea until almost touching the city. People moved to the center of the province, towards the highest areas of what was ever called Tandil.

His father had told him about these cities and these names he did not know. He had made him read the works of Ameghino. It was our father, Roger's father, Claudio Levi, the third, or the fourth that was called. He learned that Ameghino had studied the ancestors of man especially in that area of the province, without needing to go to the usual centers where the oldest vestiges of civilization had been found. That is why he had stood out in America, rescuing her from oblivion and taking her with the truth to the great centers of culture. Not Europe or Africa, but in the study centers where the mind of man was cultivated with science.

As he walked through the landing field, after descending from the plane, which already raised flight, leaving only two passengers in such a place, he remembered the names of the ancients who had inhabited that region thousands of years before. Homo platansis had been rebuilt several times, perfected as remains were less or greater depth. Floods had caused fossil remains, maintained for centuries in good condition, began to ruin in the last hundred years. How Roger's father had asked himself on those evidence, speaking for himself in the library, if when he had begun to study, the ruin had already begun. His father's father, grandfather Roger Levi once came to see those remains in the already disappeared Museum of Anthropology of the city. He himself came to see the remains that Claudio Levi, the first to be called that, had in the old house, beforeof being destroyed. When that old Levi never returned from his voyage of exploration to the moon, the world had begun to change. The books disappeared in a fire at the library to which they were donated. The phonograph records, the photographs, the exploration journals of many years were destroyed in the Library of Congress. Only the verbal heritage remained, and a private library that the Levis protected from the government's greed for the destruction of memory.

With oblivion as the de facto law, the humps began to appear.

Roger carries his suitcase, heavy even though it's not very large. His back hurts, and he sees his shadow on the plain as he walks toward the ruins. The sun hits his hump; his shirt barely protects him from its intensity. His clothes hang down in front and are missing in back. There was never a way to adapt clothing to this human frame. As if clothing design still had the status of art, as he knows it once was, when man had aesthetic beauty. When anything worn over a person could become an ornament whose purpose was simply to highlight the beauty of the human body. Therefore, the clothes of this generation were absurd, failing to achieve even the slightest level of practicality, which was the only thing essential to support the weight of the hump. Clothing that fit over this deformity like a shoe on a foot, molding itself, suppressing the discomfort with the temporary forgetfulness that comfort brings. But, he told himself many times, the purpose of the hump was not to go unnoticed. The purpose of the human hump is punishment, permanent discomfort: the only permitted memory, and above all, the only obligatory memory.

Like everyone else, his face looked toward the ground, even if he tried to avoid it, and thus his neck hurt tremendously, causing dizziness and a future, certain disability. The men didn't even reach sixty years of age. And yet, the state's discourse, represented by all those leaders with humps adorned in neat uniforms, bodies protected nonetheless by treatments the population could never receive, was so demagogic that everyone had come to believe they suffered the same as them. But Roger was convinced that the most definitive form of domination and power is to equate the dominator with his victim. When that equality was established in the minds of the people, the rest no longer mattered. A man envies what another has and considers it a privilege. But who could envy someone who is exactly

like them? Self-esteem had been abolished forever, and envy nullified by commiseration.

Roger walks slowly over the stones and grasslands. It is an inhospitable path, one that few have traveled in the last fifty years. He concentrates on tolerating the discomfort and the heat, trying to forget that his shadow resembles a hunched ape, extending its upper limbs longer than they actually are. Finally, he decides to face the shadow that accompanies him. He sees how his arms hang almost to the ground. He sees the enormous hump extending beyond the limits of his head. He contemplates the contours of his skull and knows it is very similar to those he has seen in the old sketches. He knows they were based on the fossils that someone in his family of professors and anthropologists found in the depths of that same soil, many, many years ago. Those same fossils also walked hunched over, as if accustomed to a new way of life. They raised their heads instead of lowering them; they tried, at least. Their feet left imprints in the ancient rock, feet that resembled hands at first.

Roger stops and sits on the damp ground. His pants become soaked, the tail of his shirt soaked with salt water. The sea is dominating; the battle with the rivers has settled into a permanent truce in which the sea will finally triumph. He takes off his boots and looks at his tired feet. He rubs them, thinking of the figures he will sketch when he finds the remains he knows he will find in the ruins of the city. A city abandoned long ago, and therefore relegated to the state's interest in making all memory forgotten. Something is hidden deep within, beneath the buildings, in the sidewalks of the old cobblestone streets, in the basements of old family homes, in the storerooms of bars, at the bottom of which must lie the vestiges of a dead world.

Sara will do the final illustrations for his book. He will bring her the exact descriptions, and she, so intuitive, so sensitive, will be able to express the exact form of the ancient man.

Yes, Roger tells himself, smiling despite the pain and the burden on his shoulders, getting up with difficulty to begin walking once more, this time without stopping until he reaches the customs office that protects the ruins. nas. Who knows if there's even surveillance these days? No one's interested in a fable of sand, just another desert. His father once told him something like that, the voice of a poet who lived in these lands almost three hundred years ago. Then, from his memory, comes that insignia bastardized by the priests of oblivion, a name not that of the poet who once imagined such a phrase, but one he knows is much older. Among the old anthropology books were the poems of that other poet who imagined long epics expressed in verses, often incomprehensible, repetitive, but which provoked anguish as if they penetrated the human heart, perhaps that thing called the soul. Man fighting the gods as equals.

Looking at the city that grows as it advances, as it leaves behind the lengthening shadow, he turns and thinks. His body now more like what it once was, like when he was born. Because he knows he didn't have a hump when he was expelled from his mother's body. That shadow tells him so,

speaks to him like those snakes that slither through the grasslands he has just walked through. Snakes that form circles, and the names Roger and Claudius, in that tiny, naive attempt at immortality, are nothing compared to the great sweep of history.

He knows now that his son, when he and Sara conceive him, will be called Homer. That child will be the man who will remember the vanished world in which men dominated men with the imprint of their feet on each other's backs.

3

Sara regrets having fallen asleep. Even in her half-sleep, she reproaches herself for not being able to stay awake, because any carelessness on her part is the opportunity the others are waiting to catch her and take her son away from her. She doesn't know what time or what day it is. She has lost track of how long she's been in the hospital. She tries to remain reasonable, as Roger taught her. Logic helps keep the mind clear and the spirit calm. It can't have been more than two days, she thinks as she lifts her head from the pillow. It's already dawn with a luminosity similar to any other morning. She hears noises behind the bedroom door, the usual footsteps of the staff coming and going, the carts and stretchers, and the occasional unexpected shout. She looks at the nightstand next to the bed. Breakfast is untouched. It must have been fifteen minutes since it was served, and soon they'll be back for it. She touches the cup, cold. She sits up in bed, leaning against the headboard. She touches her stomach.

For now, I've saved you, she tells her son. She wonders how much longer she can do it. She knows she's like an ant against an army of men. Sooner or later, they'll overpower her. Her only alternative is to flee the hospital, and this, too, proves impossible. She gets up and walks to the barred window. She gazes out at the vast, sunlit park. For a moment, she longs to go down and walk among those trees to feel the warm summer breeze. If only Roger were with me, she laments. But she hasn't been able to reach him for days. He hadn't answered her calls since before she was caught. Where could he be? What had happened to him? Several times she thought he might be dead, and grief and pain mingled with mortification for not having let him know she was pregnant; and also resentment and bitterness for having abandoned her for so long.

She sat up in bed, reproaching herself for her own stupidity. It was all ultimately her fault: not having told Roger the truth, leaving the paintings open to anyone's scrutiny, and above all, not having run away or hidden somewhere. But until not long ago, her life was like a dream in which she was permanently clouded, her ears completely deaf and her vision filled with visions any psychologist would call illusions. Reality transformed into that which others desired. The only one who had attempted the opposite was Roger, and yet she must have reproached him for not doing so with

vigor, with cruelty even, as if she, a woman, were a small animal that needed to be taught little by little.

"My God!" She heard herself crying out in a low voice. She thought of that god of her ancestors, of whom Roger had spoken. They belonged to a different race, as they had proclaimed themselves for centuries. They were few in number, and yet they managed to survive all that time because they were strong, because they were the chosen people of the god they worshipped. Now without books, it only persisted in the atavistic memory of each of its surviving members. Like breathing, Jewish thought was an unconscious hindrance where the body had gradually gained importance through the discoveries of science, manifesting in it the fatality of providence. The only way to absolute survival was to enclose the divine soul within the walls of the flesh, and turn the flesh into stone that, very ... Very slowly, it would be turned to dust, like the walls of Jerusalem.

Sara never understood what her husband was talking about those nights when she listened to him tell her these old stories she thought were made up. It was either that, or he was going crazy. At times, she feared for her sanity, and for her own future with him. These were not times to leave one's life to the dictates of the state, Sara was aware of that. She had to be smarter than them, to anticipate their precautions.

She felt a kick in her stomach, and at that moment the morning nurse came in.

"Good morning, Sara. I see you've rested until late, and that seems very good to me. Today will be an exhausting but very happy day. But why haven't you had breakfast?"

She lifted the tray and stared at her, standing in front of her, who was still sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing her white nightgown, her hair disheveled, barefoot, and her hands on her swollen belly. She knew she was helpless and poor before this woman, who was undoubtedly beautiful, with her impeccably white uniform, her brown hair under her cap, whose beauty even her hump didn't spoil too much.

"Is it today? But I have two more days..."

The nurse smiled, while placing a hand on Sara's shoulder, she said:

"You poor thing, I know your husband has abandoned you, but trust us..."

Sara stood up, filled with anger. The woman stepped back and staggered. For several seconds she tried to stay on her feet, but fell backward, as the tray and all its contents fell to the floor. Sara watched her, standing still and motionless. The situation, however briefly, had reversed.

"My husband didn't abandon me; he's away. And he doesn't know she's going to have a child, that's why he's not here."

The woman looked at her, perplexed. She seemed unsure of what to do, but suddenly her face changed. She was definitely not like the other nurses.

She stood up, straightened her uniform, swept back the strand of hair that had fallen over her forehead, and called housekeeping. Her coldness bordered on a parsimony covered with a patina of irony and cruelty. Deep in her eyes, Sara saw a great deal of pain.

The smell of the spilled breakfast was replaced by that of disinfectants. The cleaning lady left, and Sara wondered what would happen now. No doubt the woman would call the doctor to sedate her. She had to do something to prevent that. But the nurse told her to go back to bed, with apparent calm. The naive expression wouldn't return for a long time, except when she was in the presence of the doctors. Sara had resolved to show the intelligence she hid from others.

"Well, Sara. You really have turned out to be a special person. It's not for nothing that the doctor locked himself in this room with you yesterday..."

"Do you know what he told me?"

"What else could I have explained to you, being who you are, and the way you rebelled?"

"And why are you telling me that, you...?"

"My name is Myriam, and if I'm speaking to you like this, it's because you're one of the few who would understand what I'm about to tell you. Besides, it's a kind of relief for me. As you can see, I'm forced to fulfill a role I've learned, but not one I wanted. In a way, it's a pleasure to talk with someone like you. Half of the doctors, from whom I thought I'd come to expect some intelligence, are automatons, and the other half are resigned old men, like Dr. Farías. You come from a long tradition of doctors in your family, and those qualities don't fade away, as has happened to your husband, if I understand correctly. You mean..."

Sara didn't expect such a way of speaking. Myriam was extremely polite, even cultured by the standards of the time. Now that she had sat up in bed, her manners were refined, the movements of her hands careful, matching the expressions on her face and the looks, sometimes haughty, and almost always sad and resentful.

"My God, Myriam, then you must help me save my son."

"Save him from what?"

"From what you know... from the hump..."

Myriam laughed loudly, and covered her mouth, directing a laughing glance toward the door.

"I should have known you were going to ask me, but I stopped thinking about anyone finding out about all this so many years ago that it didn't even occur to me this time, despite knowing that you were aware of our customs."

"It's a horrendous law, a crime..."

Myriam stared at her, grabbed her shoulders, and said:

"What do you know, Sara, about crimes?" It's a crime to kill a baby who hasn't yet sinned...

"But you collaborate with them, you participate in the system..."

"In which I was born, like the two previous generations. I'm just doing my job..."

"I think you, knowing what you know, do it out of resentment. Look in the mirror, and knowing the truth, you can't say you were born with that hump."

Myriam stood up and went to the mirror behind the closet door. The creaking soundThe creaking of the hinges sounded like an ancient sound, almost like the squeal of a caged animal. And the image of the nurse with her hump reminded Sara of the stories Roger had told her about the ancient times of prehistory. Then she closed the door and, looking at Sara, began to tell:

"I've had eleven children. I've looked in the mirror more times than you think. I know my body in every possible form, with the size of my pregnancy at each month of gestation, after birth, and with the characteristics of each child I've fathered. They've all been different. And they've all died, Sara. I only have one left, the seventh. They all died after postpartum surgery. The doctors told me not to get pregnant again; they recommended it after the third. But I insisted, I don't really know why..."

She stopped, taking her steps toward the chair next to the bed. She sat with her back to the light from the window. The nurse's brown eyes looked at her from a distant depths she couldn't see, let alone touch. And even the mere thought of their contact sent a shiver through her.

"It was as if I had a duty, which was to have a child who would survive these days, who would be like all the others. I told myself that if they died, it was because I was somehow resistant to the law. I handed them over to the doctors, of course; no one can accuse me of anything else. I demonstrated my will by handing them over to society, to the way the state wanted them. But they died, one after another."

Sara sat up in bed, in pain. The kicks were becoming more frequent, and although she didn't want to show it, the other woman noticed. How could she hide it from her, if everything I was telling her was true?

"But one survived, wasn't it?"

Myriam smiled reluctantly.

"He's dead in life, Sara." He's paralyzed from the neck down, living in the bed the state gave me. He doesn't speak, and I have to spoon-feed him. He only looks, sometimes at me, sometimes at other things I can discern in his horror-filled gaze. Sometimes I want to kill him, but the very hatred I've come to feel for him is a force that helps me continue my life. I couldn't live, Sara, without doing this work.

Sara understood. Revenge without hope of redemption.

"But this time it could be different, haven't you thought about it? If you help me rescue my son, avoid surgery, it would be a kind of compensation for all your children. Imagine, my son would be a kind of redeemer. The only normal one in the whole world."

"What's normal, Sara? What your husband told you about us before the corrective surgery? No one is born forever as they are. No one is the baby they were at birth. We are born and die at every stage of life." That's why I don't know what you're calling abnormal...

"This hump that I haven't tolerated for as long as I can remember," he said, trying to reach behind his back to hit himself.

Myriam held him back.

"Stop playing the martyr, no one believes that anymore. And in any case, we all are. I can't do anything against the system; whoever isn't in, is out, and the punishment is already upon us, we've been carrying it from the beginning. There's nothing but resignation, and in any case, revenge is fictitious or, from every point of view, completely harmless, because it's directed at the wrong object, as you rightly said."

"So you live off resentment, you feed like a vermin."

The nurse laughed even louder this time.

"What an old-fashioned, literary expression! I don't know whether to congratulate you or pity you. It's one of the many figures you undoubtedly learned from your husband, so fond of old books. But it's true, in a way." We are dead, dear Sara, in morte sumus, to use an expression the old doctor brings out from time to time. The living dead must feed themselves somehow, and resentment has the power to regenerate itself. It is the most economical food in the world, and the one that most scorches the soul of those who harvest it.

The rest of the afternoon was lost in an abyss of time from which nothing could rescue her. She sank into forgetfulness, as if Myriam's words had slowly transported her to a place, not a state, but a space that her body was occupying fragment by fragment, cell by cell. Her bones were being transported in boxes after being cleaned, her skull, her pelvis, her vertebrae. The flesh that surrounded them was a warm shelter from which blood flowed without pain or sadness. It was, perhaps, like the fossils Roger had seen in the museum his father had taken him to, or like the mummies that still preserved the remains of human flesh, dry and cracked, but still intact in its resistance to time. Until his entire body was inside a mass of petrified earth, within one of the many strata deposited by different geological eras. In the immense dream she could no longer call by that name, because it wasn't a dream but a life dissociated from thousands of other successive lives over countless years, she felt a kind of trophy that the hands of many men were rescuing from the earth, like someone pulling a child from its mother's womb.

She woke up in the operating room. She opened her eyes, but no one but Myriam noticed. She saw in his gaze, in the single eyes on the dead face

covered by the mask, a complicity. And that was enough for her to rest, finally, after seeing what she had seen for barely a second, or perhaps less than that.

The child the doctor was lifting by the legs like a calf to be led to sacrifice, had no hump.

The next memory Sara has, immediately after the birth of her son, has always remained in the shadows into which the morphine submerged her over the hours. She remembers waking up, perhaps many hours later, stammering words she wanted to say but was sure never came out. Her mouth felt stuffy and her tongue numb, saliva dripping from the corner of her mouth. A pain in her lower abdomen twisted her skin. Perhaps it was the suture from the Caesarean section, but in her dreams, she imagined herself split into hundreds of pieces that someone had tried to put together not long before she woke up. She thought of Roger, of his innate ability to put together puzzles, the same skill she used to find inconsistencies in the sketches of bone fragments in her father's and grandfather's books. How she missed her husband; it had been so long since she'd been able to communicate with him! What was he doing, what did he think of her silence? Why, then, didn't he come back to check on her, that she had sacrificed her desires so that he could fulfill his? And he didn't even have the courtesy to return, like a concerned lover. Men are like that, she told herself, they never love as much as we women do.

But she wouldn't fall into the feminist rhetoric of victimhood. Nothing was as simple as these concepts, rescued at the last minute from true feelings and true causes, which in reality no one knows. She feels alone and helpless, and more than that, she is desperate to know what has happened to her son. She knows, because she saw in Myriam's gaze at the exact moment of birth, that she was going to help her rescue him from ignominy. That was the name she had somehow unearthed in her memory, a word no one used in contemporary times, an ancient word that implied a whole world of learning, of ideas, conceptualizations, and ethics. The rupture, in reality, of all this.

For what she thought were several days, she came and went from the realm of gentle dreams, the uncertain caresses of the ancient gods, frightened by so much rejection for so long. Gods who were content to lull men and women who surrendered their reason during the hours of sleep, whether voluntarily or deliberately, it didn't matter, trying to show them the lost worlds again. And so it was that Sara saw, in those forced nights, the return of the words that spoke of the origin of the world, of the creation of man.

Then, much later, she woke with a start. Myriam was at the foot of her bed. The room was lit by the intense light of midday. The room was so silent that she thought she'd gone deaf. She squinted, furrowed her brow, and tried to speak.

"Don't worry, Sara. It's the effect of the anesthesia. It'll pass in a while..."

"But... what day is it today?"

"Tuesday. She slept all night after the C-section."

Sara rubbed her eyes and tried to get up. She felt dizzy and clutched the sheets, digging her fingers into them.

"Not yet, my dear." "Have a glass of water," Myriam handed it to her from the nightstand, after pouring it from a glass pitcher.

The world in the room that afternoon was pristine and crystal-clear in a way she hadn't noticed before. She touched her stomach under her nightgown. She felt the stitches, and suddenly a faintness invaded her even as she sat. She had lost something, a shape of her body she had grown accustomed to over the months, so much so that she had come to believe it would always be this way. And now she was back to how she was before, and she was surprised by this new Sara, who was actually the old one, and with whom she no longer believed she had anything to do. Her body might be the same, but the shape of her thoughts were no longer.

"Where is my son?" she said in a loud, strong, and clear voice.

Myriam placed a hand over Sara's mouth.

"Lower back, dear Sara. We mustn't draw attention to ourselves."

Then she felt a sudden relief. That complicity, which had to be kept secret, was a guarantee that Myrian had done what she expected. He had promised nothing; she remembered that he had even refused to help her. But in theThe nurse's gaze always knew how to find something more, still undefined, perhaps cynicism, perhaps hopelessness, but always something the others didn't possess.

"So... you saved him?"

"For now, he's in the room, waiting for his turn for surgery. When that will be, I don't know."

"We have to get him out as soon as possible. I have to get out of here..."

"Only with the discharge, Sara..."

"No, we'll escape with the baby. I need your help, please..." She leaned toward the nurse, grabbing her shoulders. He smelled the scent of the medications soaked into her white uniform, even her brown hair. Seeing her so closely, he noticed she wasn't as young as she appeared, in keeping with what she had told him about her eleven children.

"Myriam, when we get out of here, we'll be companions forever. I will owe you my life and that of my son, and that's why I will help you with yours; I will take care of both of you when you're at work." With Roger's return, everything will be different...

The nurse smiled like someone hearing a tender, impossible idea.

"Not at all, Sara. If I help you, we won't be in contact again; it's essential for both of us."

"As you wish, but how will we do it then...?"

Myriam leaned close to Sara's ear and murmured the plan.

By ten o'clock at night, the hospital was almost completely silent. Myriam had told her to have her belongings ready after dinner was served. The maids came in to take away the tray. This time, she had eaten the entire dinner; she was hungry and excited to get her son out safe and sound. She had seen him at birth, and she would keep him the way he was born to show his father. They would both be proud. When the boy grew up, perhaps he wouldn't be proud of his parents, old and crooked with those embarrassing humps, which represented more a moral defeat than a physical deformity. Roger had once said something her father had told her, when both of their humps were hurting. Her father, in turn, had heard it from his grandfather, when the first operations had begun. "You shouldn't be ashamed of the irremediable," they had said to each other. But she knew that didn't imply resignation. Different times had begun with her and her son, who still didn't have a name. Roger would be the intellectual creator of the new world, Sara the practical factor, in a much more important role than that of a simple illustrator of a book of theories.

The maids left, and when the door closed, she got out of bed and dressed in street clothes. She took the bag she had brought with her when she arrived out of the closet. She decided to leave some things; she had to have the strength to carry her son. She paced around the room, impatient for the time the nurse had told her she could leave. She turned off the lights and turned on the one on the nightstand, so no one would suspect she was still awake. She heard a single knock on the door: the agreed-upon signal. She walked to the door with her bag, looked at herself one last time in the bedroom mirror. She looked thin and gaunt, her hair straight and straw-colored. Horribly disheveled. She smiled at the stupidity of her vanity, and left after checking that the hallway was clear. She walked the long stretch that led to the stairs, as Myriam had told her. Everything seemed new to her, because she had barely left the room. She remembered being dragged down the hallway the day she resisted being admitted, screaming like a madwoman, until they sedated her. The strong, violent hands of the male nurses, or perhaps the guards, she didn't know. The lights were different now, and the staircase took her two flights above that hallway. She didn't run into anyone; presumably, the entire staff on duty was having dinner in the dining room downstairs. She wondered what she would do when she had her son in her arms. Where would she run? None of this took into account her desperation to keep the child in his original body, given the way in which, she now definitively knew, everyone is born, and before the law ordered his transformation into a being little less than a monster. That was what they were, all of humanity, animals that had regressed in the evolutionary cycle until they resembled not an ape, but something more like those insects that carry a large shell on their backs.

She reached the fourth floor. The hallway was the same as the rest, but the bedroom doors were transparent. Through each one, cribs could be seen,

more than forty or fifty of them, with narrow walkways. They were brightly lit, but she couldn't see the babies from the doorway. Occasionally, she heard a moan or a cry, soon muffled by the machine that looked after them during the night shifts. Myriam told her she was waiting for her at the last door. She walked as quietly as possible on the floor. His heart was beating extremely fast, and at times he was afraid that anxietyand weakness would make her faint. She took a deep breath and continued until she reached the indicated door.

Also transparent, the same number of cribs could be seen, perhaps many empty, since there were no cries to be heard, nor the slightest rustle of sheets. Not even the smell of the babies' secretions. Everything was neat and sterile, because operations required the utmost care for the children's survival.

She opened the door, and the nurse appeared before Sara. This time, she smiled with a different air. Her natural, icy beauty was now something more cynical, so much so that the previous one, no matter how cold or cruel, was missed at that moment. Pointing to a crib at the back of the room, she said:

"There's Claudio Levi."

How did she know I was going to call him that? Sara wondered. No doubt she had learned about her husband's family's custom regarding names. Sara didn't even look at her; she walked between the cribs, her eyes fixed on the only one that interested her. She reached it and pulled back the sheet.

My God, holy and blessed God of my ancestors, God of the mysteries revealed in the holy scriptures. How beautiful my son is, what a beautiful face, just like his father's. And she didn't know from what corner of her memory such invocative words of a god almost unknown to her came. And her joy was such that she recited them aloud, causing Myriam to grab her by the shoulders and silence her with a peremptory gesture. Sara, surprised, gave a sharp, but low, cry of shock, and her hands lifted the baby to her chest.

"You're going to get us both arrested. I told you to be quiet."

Sara nodded, but she was too excited to pay attention to the other. She had held her son's body against her chest, his face against hers, and the baby had begun to cry. She knew she was hurting him, and that no matter how much she held him back, he would cry more. Her desperation stemmed from her ignorance and inexperience. So much longing, she told herself, so much presumption of saving him, and now she realized she was naive. He wouldn't even know how to feed him.

Myriam seemed to understand all this and told her to calm down. She took the baby in her own arms and told Sara to follow her quietly. Some other babies were already beginning to wake up from the noise, and the nursery machine would call the nurses downstairs if the crying became widespread or didn't stop. Sara followed her to the hallway and then along it to the far end, where there was a door leading to a freight elevator. They both got in,

and the nurse still didn't let go of the child. Sara obeyed her, but suspicious thoughts passed through her mind. Did the nurse perhaps want to keep her son, now that she'd managed to find one who would never be operated on? she wondered. She didn't want to think about that, and if it were true, when the time came, she'd have to find the strength to prevent it.

The freight elevator descended slowly in the darkness. The baby was crying.

"You must breastfeed him, Sara."

Myriam's voice was strange, resonant like an echo from very deep depths. The freight elevator descended so slowly that for a moment she fantasized that the nurse was leading her to the famous Catholic hell. However, what that request meant was beyond her expectations. She hadn't thought of any of that, nor had anyone taught her how to feed the boy. She reached out to grab the child, and Myriam, in the darkness, while the shadows of the mezzanines hid each other's movements, handed the baby to her.

Just at that moment, the elevator stopped, but the doors didn't open. Sara didn't move, because the child, her husband's son, the descendant of her offspring, the man who would change the world, was suckling at her breast. And the small pain of the suckling was more transcendent than all the dark, small world around her. She didn't even see the child's face; she only felt his fragile body in her arms and his lips vigorously sucking his food. A scent of warm milk seduced her and enveloped her in distant reminiscences she couldn't define. From time to time, a light passed by her side, like lanterns, or doors opening and closing on the upper floors, and a moment later, she thought she heard a door open beside her, without illuminating the interior.

She looked around and suddenly remembered the nurse.

"Which way should I go when I leave?" she asked.

No one answered her.

"Myriam...?" she said very quietly.

She reached out a hand into the darkness. Emptiness filled the darkness around her.

She realized the other had abandoned her. She couldn't blame her, after all. She'd risked herself for her sake, and it still reassured her that he hadn't intended to take the child from her.

She tried to push herself up from the freight elevator floor. She slung her bag over one shoulder and pushed the door open with one foot. The light from the park's lanterns illuminated the exit, which was the hospital's suppliers' parking lot. There were probably surveillance cameras, but she trusted that luck—the cabal, as Roger said—would protect her. She went outside to hide in the shade of some trees away from the lights. There would certainly be infrared cameras, and if so, it would all soon be over. But she was prepared to die clutching her baby, like the ancient mothers of the Old Testament. She suddenly felt more than a woman of this century.

She was able to discern within herself a whole series of ancestral feelings, mostly angry, and she learned what to shout and how to act to protect her offspring.

Sirens sounded, the park lights suddenly came on. Day turned into night. Her eyes were blinded for a long moment, and she felt the footsteps and shadows of the guards running closer, increasingly hurried, calling her, ordering her to stay still. Threats and shouts followed one another until someone tried to take the child from her. It was the arms of a man, probably one of the guards. They were rough, calloused hands, not the hands of a nurse or a doctor. The sour breath of dinner invaded Sara's face, and when her vision adjusted to the sudden glare, she found herself surrounded by men with weapons, with doctors and nurses in immaculate whites approaching and pushing their way through the security guards. She saw, behind them, Myriam's face, staring at her intently. She wore a squalid smile, yet she managed to convey a confidence that she knew was destructive. She resisted having the child taken away from her. It was a repeated scene for her, like the one in the hallway when she entered the hospital, but this time she was no longer pregnant. The baby's body was not her own, and her arms were progressively weakening under the men's strength. When they finally took him away, she sank to the floor, kneeling, begging like an ancient martyr, like one of the many Mater Dolorosa she would have liked to paint someday.

"By all the gods you believe in, please let my son grow up in peace."

A doctor approached her and made her stand up. It was the old doctor Farías.

"Sara," he said in a sad and pious voice. "Your son will grow up in peace, don't doubt it. We'll give him to you soon. There's no reason to rush."

"But I want to take him before the operation..." she said, choking on a long, deep sob.

"Sara, the operation is done as soon as he's born."

And she looked up into Dr. Farías's face. She pushed him violently out of her way and ran toward the guard holding the baby. They tried to push her away, but when they heard the doctor's voice, they let her approach. She quickly removed the small sheet that wrapped him, baring his torso, and saw the two scars on either side of his neck. Then she lowered her arms and stopped crying.

Everyone began to disperse, but Myriam's gaze, somewhere among those faces, remained present, even though she couldn't see it. The guard and she remained face to face, the baby crying, tired of so much movement and restlessness. The doctor was beside them both.

"Come on, Sara, go back to your room to recover."

Then she looked at him, aware of a harshness her eyes had never expressed. Nevertheless, she tried to fake it with her voice. She was learning, she told herself.

"Let him feed him at least once, before you take him away."

Dr. Farías nodded reluctantly, signaling to the guard to hand over the child. After adjusting the sheet, he placed the baby in Sara's arms. She approached the doctor to hold the child, afraid that her arms might drop him. A look of maternal fear formed on her face, and she knew she was no longer considered a threat. Her hands touched the doctor's lab coat. When she moved a few feet away with her son in her arms, one of the doctor's pens was no longer in his pocket.

Sara opened her blouse and gave the baby her breast. As she did so, she hummed a tune no one had taught her, a slow, dark song, until the child seemed to quench his thirst, and he separated his lips from the nipple. As he did so, he looked at her in a way she couldn't bear. And so she stabbed the pen into the boy's chest.

4

When she passed through the entrance to the city, she could no longer communicate through the network. Neither the telephone nor the computer worked. The city had been completely erased from the rest of the world, because it was dead. And he wondered how it was that the past, nevertheless, continued to live on in the memories of so many men. If humanity had failed so completely to erase memory by destroying the vestiges of the past, why didn't it resign itself to continuing to live with that memory, turning it into a new one? There is strength instead of a burden. Not like a newborn child who doesn't even know how to feed himself, but like a man who, after a night of tragedy, wakes up in the morning with the dazzling sun in his face.

Although alone, a man is many men. Roger knows this intimately, because the shadow of his father and grandfather, of all the Levis, is constantly weighing on him. He can't erase every trace of comparison and classification from his mind. A methodical mind can be a great advantage for survival, but it is also undoubtedly a lump of bitterness in his throat. And that lump was what he conveyed to Sara in each of their long conversations. He knew she wasn't particularly interested in all this, nor did she understand it. But his wife's intuitive intelligence began to grasp what he wanted to tell her, and so, before leaving, he knew that she had reached a level of wisdom much higher than the normal level of people. Perhaps alone, that germ of restlessness and doubt would grow, without needing to be spurred on or insisted upon with an overabundance of ideas. Like a plant that requires the exact amount of water daily, and just a little more than necessary can kill it.

They didn't discuss any of this in their online conversations. He realized she didn't want to upset him by talking about the sorrows evident in her eyes. Many times he wanted to ask her, and yet he had the cowardice to remain silent, so as not to know, because knowing meant returning to her and abandoning all his work projects, forever. He would never return with

a family in tow, nor would he leave her for an imprecise period of time, surely a very long one. She, like him, knew it was now, or never again.

He crossed the dead border of the city, and it was like entering a cemetery on a sunny day, at exactly three in the afternoon. He remembered being taken as a child to visit the family vault, walking through the center of the city cemetery streets holding his mother's hand, gazing at the Stars of David on the vault doors they passed. Then, the sound of the key in the heavy metal door, the smell of dead flowers, dampness, and the dust on the coffins. His parents' long faces, the barely murmured chant, the light from the skylight joining the light coming through the newly opened door, scaring away moths and other insects. They made him change the water for the old flowers. He carried the large, heavy vase to the sink in the corner, which adjoined the tombstone area. He threw the flowers into the basket, dumped the rotten water into the sink, and washed the vase. But his eyes couldn't tear their gaze from the tombstones, because the afternoon seemed darker than the dead of night. The sun blinded him; the absolute silence of the siesta was a coagulated space of time about to explode. Then he did what he had to do as quickly as possible and returned to his parents. The flowers were renewed and the vault was relocked. He was a child then, and the key was associated with the idea of keeping the dead safe.

And it's true, he tells himself, as he walks down the deserted city street. The dead and the past are in our heads, locked away. Perhaps they wanted to escape, we don't know, because we're so used to the idea that they're ours, that we can't live without them, that the thought of their absence is like our own death. The fear of the emptiness of memory is greater than the fear of uncertainty. The latter is quickly resolved with the first concrete fact of reality; what has happened becomes the first certainty of experience, but forgetting implies something erased, an empty space, an obsession, an underlying force that creates tunnels.

He saw her shadow following him to the right, hunched over, on the sidewalk. It must have been three in the afternoon. The buildings were practically intact; he could see them almost above the city center. What he was walking through now was the outskirts, the streets of residential houses with bars on the windows, with wooden doors opening onto front yards or conservatories. The afternoon breeze occasionally rattled the screen doors on their creaking hinges. This was the only sound that attenuated the complete silence, bordering on the severe deafness of the living death that had been planted there to grow. That's what his father had once told him: death lives in the ruins left behind by the past, and it's not a punishment for man, but an offering. Memory is an offering we have rejected, like spitting at God, and the voice with which he had said that phrase always sounded strange, because it was unusual to hear such direct references to his parents' religion from his mouth. He was thirsty, and there was little water left in his canteen. He doesn't know what he was thinking when he thought he was going to find someone. in the ruins he was about to explore. Everything he was doing now seemed like a pure fantasy. He deeply regretted his folly and wished he were home with Sara, doing his job and simply living without worries or doubts. But you can't live like that if you aren't in that character. So he dismissed the lamentations,

which resembled dusty pages of old Bibles, and continued walking the streets that intersected with countless diagonals. There were still a few signposts on the corners, with numbers that no longer spoke of significance to him. Signposts for people who no longer existed. He wondered why destruction and oblivion had been especially cruel here, yet allowing Buenos Aires to continue to reluctantly survive. Perhaps the politically motivated founding of La Plata as the center of the province, leaving Buenos Aires as the nation's capital. A modern city, a young city, which had nevertheless grown with the prestige of ancient things, the cathedral, the paleontology museum. A new city that preserved primordial memory, or a portion of it, in the center of its brain. Buenos Aires was conscious memory, which could be repressed and gradually forgotten. It was a battered old woman dying, her limbs rickety from arthritis, and the minds of its buildings were emptying with the effects of senility. Early dementia ravaged the city over the years, a slow death that would nonetheless ultimately keep it embalmed, like a clean and tidy pantheon.

The city I was now walking through, however, was slowly falling apart due to neglect. Nothing better than indifference to make forgetting as painless and effective as possible. I thought I heard the occasional dog barking, although perhaps it was the wind in the streets, or walking through the empty hallways of houses or buildings. As I neared the center, the buildings were not as tall or as frequent as in other cities. The urban layout had arranged open, bright, and green spaces and blocks. He saw, already very close, the bulk of the cathedral, beautiful yet half-ruined in its countless nooks and crannies. He was afraid to approach it, and didn't know why it intimidated him. Its height, probably, its solitary presence in the middle of the vast, empty grounds that surrounded it. He knew that its basements held relics, which in any case would have been looted or confiscated by recent governments. He thought of the paleontology museum, to which Ameghino had dedicated so many fruitless years of effort, already destroyed almost ninety years before.

Where would he begin his exploration, he wondered, with thirst in his body and trembling in his soul in the face of so much abandonment and uncertainty. How could he have been so naive as to think he could fight, alone, against the armies of oblivion? The modern city, the new city, had been crushed in its spirit, like the newborns of the last two generations. The old can simply be left to die.

My God, Roger Levi thought to himself, what is emerging in the minds of men, what imperishable changes, what atrophy, and what monsters arise from the sickness of the spirit? Then he decided he would enter any family home, rescuing the most trivial elements of everyday life. He stopped in front of a house with a wide front, a brick and wood fence, and a tiled patio leading to the half-open front door. He walked among the remains of old burned tires, ironwork, fabrics, and what looked like pieces of broken toys. He entered, pushing open the door that had almost collapsed, absorbing the breath of antiquity. The semidarkness hid nothing but grime and dust, furniture covered in cobwebs but sound and in the place where its owners had left it when they died. In the main room, there was a dining table with a centerpiece of dried flowers, probably surviving more than a century. He

ran a hand over the dusty and muddy table; perhaps the roofs let water in during the rains. He went to a piece of furniture full of large and small drawers. He opened them one by one, finding objects of all kinds, many of which he didn't know what material or purpose they were made of. Broken tooth combs, bracelets, glasses and plates, napkin rings, glass salt and pepper shakers, cheese graters, trays—everything he put back in its proper place. He went to another room, where there was a bed and a wardrobe. It was still covered with a wrinkled bedspread, as if someone had gotten up that morning. Next to the bed, on the nightstand, was a photo of a man and a woman in a well-kept garden, perhaps the one Roger had entered through, both sitting on a bench where their humps were less obvious. He opened the wardrobe, and a bunch of moths flew out, and he could see the remains of his food. The remains: destroyed clothes, shirts, pants, overcoats, sweaters, scarves, and a musty smell revealed that all of this had survived thanks to a constant water infiltration, creating mold on the walls, forming new life forms that coexisted with the old garments.

He suddenly remembered his father's library, so carefully maintained, and suddenly destroyed and looted, like a crime. Perhaps the forgetfulness of senility and old age is the most merciful of deaths, like this one in the house he was now visiting. The other thing seemed like murder to him. And because without a doubt it was, he knew that in every house and building in the city he would find the same thing, but not what he was looking for. If only he could find photos of the men in their original form... he lamented as he left the house. But the new domination had done a good job on memory, a thorough training in destruction. It would have been easy to plant bombs in the cities and destroy every trace of the past, and yet something would always persist somewhere. However, first, the seal of physical prostration and pain had been instilled in humanity: that was humpback. Then, the destruction of all memory, of all traces, was at the individual's own risk. And it had been so effective that only the most cultivated minds, and perhaps only the most naively brave or stubborn, had resisted.

During the next twelve months, Roger Levi made many exploratory attempts throughout the length and breadth of the city. He first surveyed the oldest and newest areas to locate where vestiges close to the surface would most likely be found. He knew that the foundations of the new buildings would have destroyed everything that remained of the old days. He was also aware that on the outskirts of the city bordering the countryside, and especially along riverbanks, he might find more suitable material for exploration, but this was not what interested him. His object of study lay not in the remote times of humanity, which could be found in the discoveries of "baked earth," as Ameghino called it, but in very recent times, which had nevertheless disappeared. However, he was convinced that he was one of them, that those men of previous generations were no different from those of today, with their hunchbacks and their bodies twisted by arthritis. They were not a consequence of species selection, but a product of man's action on other men. Some philosophers have called wars instruments of natural selection, the same as great epidemics or natural disasters. But Roger couldn't agree. Nature's selection is based on

a species' ability to survive in the face of geographical changes, whether geological, climatic, or economic. The latter includes dietary changes, methods of cultivation, and production, resulting from the development of culture. If civilization itself can be called a means of natural selection, then anything goes regarding the death or exploitation of humans. But civilization implies knowledge and wisdom, and this brings with it the development of sensitivity. Mercy, therefore, is another form of compassion and love. Natural selection can be cold and cruel, but never unjust. It has ingenuity, but not ignorance.

Then, he began with the family homes in the oldest neighborhoods. He walked through the deserted streets, with petrified tree trunks on the sidewalks that had once shaded the cobblestone streets and the grooved tile sidewalks where neighbors sat to read during summer siestas, or to drink mate and greasy biscuits at dusk. These were images that came to him from memory, along with the phrases his father had told him, who in turn had heard them from Grandfather Roger. And as if each name conveyed the knowledge of his heritage, he could now see those domestic scenes in the streets of La Plata. He could hear the murmur of the wind through the treetops along the sidewalks, the song of the sparrows, the sound of the pages of books being turned one after another, and even the labored breathing of the old men who were dozing in the drowsiness of the siesta. He also heard the barking of dogs loitering in the evenings, but the animals he saw now were not those of his imagination, but real. Short, white dogs with short legs and snouts and no ears. A pair approached him as he walked, and when he stopped in front of a house where he was planning to start work, they stood before him, heads raised, sniffing the air for his scent, but with eyes that were blind. He wondered how they had survived. Perhaps there must be people in the city. Perhaps, at some point, He hoped he would find them, but for now he had to work, and those animals seemed to be preventing him. They were strange dogs, like vestiges of ancient times, living remnants that have survived every attempt at destruction. Not because anyone had tried to preserve them, but precisely because they were kept on the sidelines, hidden and forgotten somewhere in the city, they had seen time and men pass by. And now here they were, more than contradicting him, studying him with their infallible sense of smell.

Then Roger took a few steps toward them, barely looking at them, directing his gaze toward the door of the house he had chosen. The dogs moved out of his way, without hesitation or fear, because he no longer had any of them either, or at least he tried to hide it. He knew they were following him toward the entrance of the house. They entered with him into the main living room of a stately Victorian English mansion. Inside, the furniture was almost intact, the china still behind the cut glass of the display cases, the vases on their pedestals in the corners, and a delicate white marble statue stood in a corner leading to the staircase. Over the dining room table was a white lace tablecloth with tassels at all four corners, hanging from the edges of the table. The chairs, with their legs elaborately carved with Doric figures, were as if purposely set aside for future visitors who never arrived. On the ceiling was a crystal chandelier and multiple empty lamp holders

from which hung crystal teardrops that Roger's hand rang like bells. The dogs were excited by that sound, barked, and then fell silent, respectful, sitting beside him as if now offering him veneration. "Who are you?" Roger said aloud, looking at them, knowing the absurdity of his question, but he hadn't spoken to anyone in so long that something alive and waiting for his attention was extremely stimulating.

The animals turned their heads attentively, wagged their tails—actually, the short tails they had—and their mouths opened with a certain joy. That was the most they knew how to express, or were willing to grant, to the new visitor. Then Roger began rummaging through the drawers of every closet in that house, in every room, under the loose floorboards, behind the pictures and paintings. He found safes forever locked, banknotes hidden under beds. Chests with mementos, papers, documents, long hair in a small metal box, empty picture frames, but some showed the former inhabitants with the typical humps of recent times. It was a task that lasted almost a week, recording each important discovery in his notebook, the same one he had used to classify the sectors of the city. When he finished, he went in search of the tools he had seen in the shed at the back of the house, the ones he would use for the next twelve months. He grabbed a shovel and a hoe and began digging in the garden at random. The dogs crowded around him, excited, and Roger spoke to them to reassure them. He put down the shovel for a moment and stroked both of their heads. They sat down, more serene, and then he began working again, the dogs still attentive to what he found. Every shovelful of earth caused the animals to come and go, sniffing everything, and this was a great guarantee for Roger that he wouldn't overlook anything important.

He was aware that he was doing something his family wouldn't have approved of in their strict scientific approach, but times were different. What he was doing had no great methodology, and he was guided only by basic logic and intuition, because he hadn't been able to learn anything else, and therefore had nothing else. The work became increasingly difficult for him, until the weight of his hump made him stop and sit on the ground, next to the separated earth and the shallow hole he had managed to dig. The animals approached him and lay down on either side.

"If you could speak to me," he said, and both turned their heads toward the source of his voice. "I know you know what I'm looking for." They didn't answer in any way. They turned their heads to the ground, between their paws, and moaned very surreptitiously for a long time, the whole time Roger rested.

Night was deepening in the sky over the city, and the shadow of the afternoon was darkening as quickly as he hadn't seen it for a long time. The scent of the countryside reached them with the rising wind, soft but aromatic. The dogs got up and went toward the street. Something was calling them, perhaps their own kind, because there must surely be many more, or perhaps people they knew. Then he got up and ran to the street to follow them, but he couldn't find them. They had disappeared at the dawn of night, as if swallowed up by the cobblestone streets. He returned to the garden and continued digging, untilHe fell asleep.

In the morning, he woke up in the hole he'd dug, his clothes and hands covered in dirt. He was hungry, so he dug out the provisions he'd found in a warehouse filled with cans in the center of town. He drank from the canteen he regularly filled from the houses' tanks. Someone lived in the city, because the running water supply was still working, so why didn't they contact him? Only the dogs had approached him, almost like messengers. He washed his face and ate something while sitting at the kitchen table, which smelled of old wood. He went outside to continue his work. He found buried toys, dog bones, and rusty cans. He didn't know what else he expected to find; perhaps he believed that by digging just a few meters he could find the fossil remains of Neanderthal man. He allowed himself a sarcastic laugh, because for him, finding traces of the man without a hump was as difficult as it was for his ancestors to find the most ancient fossils. The painstaking work of forgetting had been too effective, and so he stopped, his arms resting on the handle of the shovel, the weight of his body on it. The pain was extreme, and he was unprepared for such work. What a careful plan the creators of the new man had carried out. A hump like the one they all suffered made all work impossible, except submission.

From then on, he went from house to house, alternating between old commercial premises where he found remnants of a civilization he had never known. He read old documents, laws on commerce and municipal licensing, property rentals and sales, birth and death certificates, remedies for old illnesses, glass syringes, ampoules of medicine. But not one photo of the men standing upright, as if a law had decreed that from one day to the next no one should be photographed. He tried to find such a document in the court records. He entered the main building, half-ruined, moving through the hallways and stairs that echoed distantly with his footsteps, while the dogs—the same ones or others, it didn't matter—followed him, sitting at his feet as he went through file by file on the dusty shelves that collapsed one after another as he tried to remove the folders and sheets of paper. He read records of trials, criminal punishments, names of men and women destined for prison. In one of them, he found what he was looking for, and suddenly the pieces of the jumbled puzzle in his mind fell into place and took on the logic he needed like the air itself to live by. There was a folder exclusively for cases of violations of the law that decreed the penalty of life imprisonment for criminals. Cameras were abolished; anyone who owned one had to declare it for destruction by the authorities.

That was the first gesture of a great epic, of a war that sapped human will. Then came the lack of education, restrictive public health laws, and mandatory periodic psychological and physical examinations. The rebellion of the violent was subdued first by narcotics, and then by the breakthrough in preventive surgery. The appearance of the hump no longer made all this necessary. Its very presence constituted an unbearable burden, and from then on, his entire life was a veneration of the pain it caused.

When almost a year had passed, one day he followed the dogs, convinced that there were other human beings in the city. He tried several times, but to no avail. If they didn't disappear into the darkness, until he couldn't even find their distinctive scent in the streets, they would flee, slipping away aimlessly, and then Roger would abandon the chase, tired and unsure

which one to follow. One afternoon, however, he followed a pair of dogs for more than three hours. He must have had infinite patience while they went from house to house, looking for food, encountering other animals, carefully sniffing around sidewalks and walls. It was almost dusk, and they were in a peripheral neighborhood, close to one of the abandoned access routes. There were few houses, and the dogs continued walking, distancing themselves from each other only to sniff the pockmarked asphalt and the grassy areas along the roadsides. They must have realized he was following them, since there were almost no places to hide, and their sense of smell was exquisite. But they ignored him, perhaps expecting his patience to run out at any moment. He was about to do so when the sun began to set on a sprawling, three-story building that occupied almost an entire block. At first, it looked like a government office, since it had a high staircase and a Romanesque arch over the main door, and all the rest were windows on the three floors that extended to the corners. Each of them had a pointed arch at the top and ornate railings. The general condition was disastrous, with some balconies in ruins and ornaments fallen to the ground, like fragments of cherubs or gargoyles on the grass.

As he drew closer, he no longer paid attention to the dogs. Perhaps they had disappeared into that building, most likely. He couldn't help but feel fascinated by the place. It had the appearance of a nobility in long and resounding decline, if not already long dead. But the architecture suggested incongruous sensations to him, because his knowledge was bookish and not guided by experience or a skilled hand. Above the entrance was a frieze with a phrase written in Latin, now forever indecipherable, and above it was an enormous concrete eagle, its wings outstretched but broken. It was somewhat hidden by the plants that had grown on the roof around the bird, and by two concrete vessels that supported it several meters on either side. Roger stopped at the foot of the stairs, looking up as far as he could. The bird's beak was also broken, and it had no eyes, but its body, head, and wings, though broken, gave it an air of power that, despite the ignominious state the years had left it in, provoked unease.

He had a brief flash of documentary images he'd once seen in the old videos his father had inherited from his grandfather's archives. He reminisced as he slowly climbed the stairs, and it was as if those very steps were speaking to him when he remembered what it was about. He saw an explosion: the collapse of the Nazi swastika from one of Berlin's buildings at the end of World War II in the twentieth century. His father had told him something about that time, as if it were an old legend of ancestral religious controversies. But this meant nothing to him more than old stories that had amused him from his childhood or adolescence. He stopped to look up once more, and this time he could read just above the metal door—a large revolving door with broken glass—a sign that read: "Hotel Águila." At least now he knew what he would find inside: not the remains of offices and government buildings, but hallways, elevator shafts, countless rooms, restaurants, and gaming rooms, because that hotel must have been intended for the more economically well-off population of society at the time.

The revolving door is stuck, and he pushes it uselessly. He discovers two entrances with wooden doors on either side. He enters through the one on the right, into the large central lobby. The carpets are worm-eaten in places, like puddles or dried-up lagoons. The reception desk is still almost intact, dusty of course, but not as much as one might expect given how long he assumes the place has been abandoned. The lockers with the room numbers are still on the wall behind the counter. Almost all of them are empty, except for a few keys that still hang dead. There are some letters in the space between a few pigeonholes, and an overwhelming curiosity drives him to walk over and pick them up. He gathers them in his hands and feels the paper, and thinks of the books in his father's library. The envelopes bear unknown names to recipients and senders; the letters are sealed. He goes to open one, but is startled by a human voice, the first he's heard in almost a year. And he thinks, for a moment, that he's dreaming, that his personality has actually split into a kind of clone with which his imagination has been speaking all this time. He turns around, looking around, ready to accept his temporary psychosis, and then he sees a young man standing at the counter.

"A man's correspondence is private, sir," the voice said.

When he saw the body it came from, Roger felt a kind of dissociation. He didn't respond until he felt safe and calm, but a vertigo made him drop the letters and hold onto the counter. He knew he'd been malnourished for a long time and had lost more weight than he should have. A thick beard covered his thin face, long enough to almost cover his sunken chest. His hump weighed more than it had in all his life.

When he recovered from his vertigo, he looked up from the counter. He rested a hand on an open book of old signatures, the pages of which crumpled and tore. He looked a little higher, because he could only see the man's chest. Now he was beside him, helping him from falling, and it was then that he discovered the height of the young man who was now trying to tell him something Roger couldn't hear because his ears were still closed and he felt pale. He felt the strength of his body that kept him from falling, carrying him to one of the armchairs in the lobby. He let himself fall, and the blood returned to his head, calming him, feeling his heartbeat establish its normal rhythm. He knew that the shock his body had received so sadly wasn't due to meeting someone after a year, but to the appearance of the man he had seen. That man didn't have a hump.

"I know the reason for your surprise," said the other, seeing Roger recovering, tears still not falling, and trying to look behind his body.

"But..." he began to stammer like a tremendously confused child.

"How can I begin to explain, sir?"

Roger waited, and realized that the other was waiting for him to tell him his name. Such a gesture of courtesy made him ashamed of his manners, which until then hadn't seemed strange to him at all, and suddenly finding himself in that place with such a man, they seemed like those of a savage.

"My name is Roger Levi. I came to the city over a year ago to explore. I'm an anthropologist, or at least that's what I do."

The man looked at him curiously.

"I think I've heard your last name, or read it somewhere. Did your parents write books?"

"Many, more like my grandfather and great-grandfather. But how do you know?"

"Mine kept a good library in this hotel, and in the old newspapers there are reports of discoveries in the name of researchers of that name. There's even someone who was sent on a space mission once, if I recall correctly."

Roger Levi looked at the man as if he were contemplating the endearing history of a vanished world. When he heard about the library, his eyes lit up, and he asked about it.

"It's gone," the other told him. "The state comes from time to time to monitor us, and of course they destroyed it a long time ago."

"I don't understand any of this, the place, you..." He asked, as if fearing the answer would destroy his sanity, "Are there anyone else like you?"

"Only my wife and I. We're descendants of ancient families in the city." Our previous generations were the first to rebel against the law of operations. In fact, it was my wife's great-grandfather who led the group in the city. His name was Gustavo Valverde. He and his friends and neighbors, among whom were my ancestors... By the way, I haven't told you my name, Rodrigo Casas. Our parents have told us that both my wife, Rosa, and I bear the names of some of our ancestors. It's a trivial custom, and one that carries little originality at first glance, but it has deeper connotations...

"It's like we go through cycles..."

Casas looked him in the eye and nodded, smiling.

"That's right, I see the same thing has happened in your family. Let me see if I can explain: our families went into hiding after the law was enacted and managed to survive a generation without being discovered. Meanwhile, the city was destroyed and stripped of its memories, of every vestige of the past." But more than fifty years ago, when we thought we were finally safe, the dogs you must have seen got us discovered. They were, in fact, our allies at first. The Valverdes had a special connection with them—I'm talking about the men in the family, not the women. The women always got along badly with those animals. But when the police contingents raided the city, they chased the dogs, and they hid where they usually did, and this hotel was one of those places. That's how they found us and tried to take us to Buenos Aires and suppress us. They made us feel deformed in front of their weak, twisted bodies, only powerful because of the weapons they carried.

Roger looked down, and Casas apologized.

"It's not important," he replied. "I think the same about us, that's why I'm here, looking for proof of how we were..."

"It wasn't easy for us to hold on. There were many of us, so those who were dominated in Buenos Aires were only a part of the whole group." The rest of us remained in the hotel basement. We were locked up for nearly thirty years, until the state forgot about us, and then we returned to our rooms. You're the first man we've seen in a very long time, and I'll include my wife when I meet him. Keep in mind that what I just told you is from my parents' time. We were born when there were no more than six of us left. The oldest have died, and only my Rosa and I remain.

"But that's what I came looking for, proof of a possibility. My wife, Sara, and I want to have a child, and I always hated having one born like us. The vast majority of the population is unaware of what is done in the postpartum quarantine. They think humans are born deformed, and this hump we carry is considered normal. If they saw you, maybe they'd be scared."

Casas laughed.

-We too are ignorant of what goes on beyond the city limits. Dogs are almost the only living beings we've ever seen in the city. Three decades on, and they've turned against us. Since the last raid, it's as if the animals were the representatives, or guardians, of the state. The Valverdes, whom they almost obeyed, have disappeared, and neither Rosa nor I can control them.

"But your existence," Roger said, suddenly enthusiastic, holding onto Casas's arms as if he were about to sink in that large armchair like a sea of discoveries. "You represent the persistence of our species, of the true structure of our body."

Casas remained thoughtful.

"What is the true shape of our body, Mr. Levi? You must know that our hominid ancestors were different from us; we were primates, accustomed to life in trees. Our skulls were different, our faces, the length of our arms, even the function of our feet. What the state does is perhaps another form of natural selection."

And as if that man had been reading the thoughts that had obsessed Roger for the past few months, he continued listening.

"The evolution of man is called civilization. Everything we do is part of human culture, not only architectural constructions, like this hotel, or great inventions, but also death and destruction. This is also culture, but not civilization. Perhaps we are returning to the beginning, and not you, but we, those of us who are already old."

Roger didn't understand how that man's beauty could be called old age. If so, every vestige of the past then was more beautiful than anything that could be created or invented from now on. The beauty of the carpets, in whose old age he saw beautiful figures, the chandeliers that hung from the ceiling, the friezes that had not been completely destroyed, the exquisite softness of those armchairs, which, due to their supposed triviality, had

been forgotten in the work of looting and destruction. He saw all of this in the hallways Casas was now leading him through, up two flights of marble stairs, whose cracks were remnants of very ancient cultures, remnants of statues glimmering in his imagination, like residue flickering in humanity's collective memory. In the hallways of the third floor, more salvaged relics were preserved. Velvet chairs, mosaics forming ornamental designs on the floor, paintings on the ceilings, wooden doors with molded bronze knockers and Gothic-shaped numbers. Everything displayed a faded and aged splendor, but beauty could not completely die. And such beauty now seemed inevitable, an indisputable truth.

Casas led him to the door of the room with an incomplete number on it. He opened it and turned on the light. A woman was lying on the bed, covered up to her neck with sheets. She was sleeping.

"This is Rosa. She's been dying for months." She was pregnant earlier this year, but one day the dogs attacked and bit her. I did what I could. I used great-grandfather Valverde's old formularies, but the infection caused septicemia, which caused her to lose our child. She won't be able to have any more, and she'll die at any moment anyway.

Rodrigo Casas looked deeply into Roger Levi's eyes.

"History repeats itself, it's cyclical, so don't be surprised by our regression. Console yourself with the thought that we, whom you see as ideals, are the ones who must become extinct."

He closed the door, and it was as if he had closed it forever on him, Roger Levi. That's when he knew he had to leave the city and return to where Sara was.

5

She realized the drugs were taking effect on her body. She felt inappropriate images filtering into her consciousness, until they dominated everything. But the traumatic forces remain intense, returning in long fragments of flashbacks. And with the recent memories, which already have the taste and aroma of the old, the smell of the drugs in a mental hospital, come the clear ideas that had guided her during the months of pregnancy, until they became obsessions.

She sits on the bed in the white room, her arms tied with a straitjacket. She doesn't try to detach herself or escape; she knows that soon she won't need to be tied up. She has seen the results of those treatments. She must be now, like her grandmother several years before, in the Intensive Psychological Rehabilitation Center. They let her see her during visiting hours, only through the images on the monitor. The grandmother was senile, the doctors said, but what Sara had suffered was what they called postpartum stress. It wasn't as common as it once was, but it did occur from time to time, especially in reasoning and obsessive women like her,

who didn't go with the flow of common sense. She would have liked to ask what they called it like that. Dr. Farías, especially.

He had entered that room almost every day since he had locked her up. He spoke to her before and after injecting her with her daily medication. The old man's voice, deep and cracked, was transforming into a soft, slow baritone to her ears, now dominated by the increasing dose of the drug of forgetfulness.

"What are you giving me, doctor?" she had asked on the third or fourth day of her medication.

Dr. Farías had smiled at her from his earthly paradise, leagues away, although she still felt the touch of his hand on her numb arm.

"A cocktail, Sara."

"I imagine, doctor. It makes you feel good, in a way, too, it even makes you not feel good."

The doctor had laughed heartily this time.

"Sara Levi, you are a very strong woman; it's hard to fight your temper. In my time, women like you were called intelligent women."

"And what does that mean, doctor? That women were made only for sentimentality and obedience?"

"Stop thinking, Sara, let yourself go." And he placed his hands over her eyes, helping her lie down, calming her like a worried old father.

When she heard the door close, she would open her eyes again, seeing only the white ceiling and windowless walls. What time was it, what day? Had it been weeks since the birth, or just a few days? She began to cry, once again, berating herself for her failure, that resounding failure to save her son from the fate they had in store for him. She doesn't regret his death, and that's the worst thing of all, she tells herself, and she knows that the others in that hospital, and what all of society will hold against her when she gets out, if they ever let her out, is that in particular. Not the reason why she killed him, but the fact that she didn't repent. Now more than ever, she is absolutely certain that if she didn't give Roger a son with a straight back, she wouldn't give him any at all.

As in a war, lives didn't matter in particular, but in general. And the life of that son represented a new beginning. She and Roger were the Eve and Adam of the new world. They would flee together to hide until Roger returned and found them. Together, then, the three of them, in the new Paradise, would begin history anew. A new cycle had begun, and what the centuries brought now didn't matter; that would be the task of future generations.

However, all had been lost. Hope was a symbol cast into the mud, and failure was a flag fluttering triumphantly in the wind on her banner. The war was lost forever, because she didn't have the strength or the intelligence to flee, but she recognized in herself the intense courage of

that last moment. She had lost the war, it was true, but she had won at least one battle, perhaps the most important one for her and Roger. And she had done it for both of them.

Then, perhaps under the influence of the drugs, she would plunge into an immense sadness like a vast stormy sea carrying her in a flimsy boat to the depths of despair. She would cry and complain loudly, tossing and turning in bed, sometimes even falling to the floor. She lamented her failure, and the hunched figure of her husband would come from distant lands to rebuke and blame her. Not for having killed the child, but for not having rescued him from the crime they were plotting against him. Death was merciful, in that case.

But slowly, the drug of forgetfulness took effect, and the periods of tranquility grew longer, and she no longer thought, literally thought of nothing but what was happening to her at the very present moment. Whether she was hungry, whether she was hot or cold, whether she had physiological needs that a ridiculous modesty made her timidly mention when the nurse entered the room. The camera in an upper corner of the room was watching her, and all Sara needed to do was raise her eyes and look there. They came in, sooner or later, to help her.

One day, they removed her straitjacket, dressed her, and led her through the hospital corridors to the street. In a car, they toured places she didn't remember, but it must have been the old city she had always lived in, the old Buenos Aires of ruined buildings, surviving like mastodons on the city blocks. They parked in front of the tall stairs of a building that should have been the courthouse. They led her through other corridors, this time dark, smelling of damp, where the echoes resonated in her ears with strange, throbbing shapes. Guilt came to her in waves, as if they were particular monsters stuck in those halls where so many had passed to be judged, and in each new arrival, they recognized a lost companion who had come to help them in their loneliness. Because whether there were hundreds or thousands, each fault was a solitary, mute or shameful species, weary ofWaiting and unable to redeem herself.

She entered the courtroom, enormous, empty except for the judge who was waiting for her behind a desk. A clerk was at a computer, transcribing what would be said there. A lawyer, the court-appointed attorney, began to speak, repeating the events of which she was accused. The judge read from his briefs without looking up at anyone at any point during the entire process. Every sound of paper, every button pressed on the keyboard, every footstep on the ancient floors, the creaking of the wooden desk when the judge leaned his elbow, all resonated in the air, constituting yet another form of the world that would be added to her recent memory. Everything that came before was behind the walls of oblivion, the high walls that the medication had formed in her mind.

She neither heard nor understood what was said there. Suddenly, she heard a gavel clang sharply and decisively, and then they led her back through the hallways toward the street. Once in the car, after many blocks, she began to recognize the neighborhood where she had once lived. Why

she remembered that and not other things she sensed were still there, a permanent burden on her mind, she wasn't sure. She had been happy there, where she had spent her childhood and where she had met Roger and lived with him. Perhaps that was why they had let her remember it, and why now they had left her there, to live alone, awaiting his return.

They opened the car door for her, helped her out, and led her to the door of her house. They didn't need to; she recognized every inch of that sidewalk. The broken curb used to lift the car she no longer had, the stubbed-out tree a few feet from the door, the same wooden door with its bronze knocker, now glued down and serving no purpose other than as decoration, the mailbox next to the door, rusted and useless. An old suburban house, almost a mansion, as befitted the Levi family, famous in the area for their studies and their renown in the country's culture. Of all that, she was the only one left.

She opened the door with the key, which she doesn't remember how she kept for so long away from home, but she found it in the pocket of the purse where she always kept it. An automatic act like all the others she would undertake from that moment on. They escorted her into the dining room and helped her sit in the same chair as always. She ran a hand over the dusty table, looking at her now-dirty fingers.

"I'll start cleaning," she said. "Roger is coming."

Then those who accompanied her, a nurse and a court employee, knew she was fine, and would be for a long time. But to be sure of this, they told her:

"We'll come once a week to interview you, Mrs. Levi. A simple routine required by law. Don't worry, take your medication, and everything will be fine."

Sara looked at them, interrupting her gesture to get up, remembering where she had left her cleaning supplies. She smiled, displaying a serenity that reassured them. They left, closing the door, and she locked it inside. She watched them through the window as the car drove away. The street was still almost deserted. It was ten in the morning, she confirmed by looking at the wristwatch they had given her. Everything had happened very early, leaving the hospital and the court proceedings, which couldn't have lasted more than fifteen minutes. The neighborhood, however, was too quiet. She recognized the houses across the street, boarded up with boards over the windows. A dog was pacing the street, sniffing at the sidewalk directly across the street. Sara opened the window and called it. The animal raised its head and seemed to look in her direction. A cool breeze relieved the slight heat she was beginning to feel in the air. It was late spring or early summer, perhaps. She'd forgotten to ask; she'd look at a calendar or turn on the television. But now that dog caught her attention. From a distance, it seemed to be looking at her, but it had small eyes. She called it again, whistling at it. The animal then crossed the street and leaned against the window. Sara noticed its eyelids were half-closed over two atrophied, blind eyes.

"Poor little dog," she said, moved. She left the window open and went to the door. She opened it again, and the dog was already standing there.

"Come on, don't stay outside. I'll feed you," but she didn't know why she said this, since there probably wasn't anything in the refrigerator. The time of his absence insisted on presenting itself in her memory, but she acted and said things as if she'd never spent a long time in a hospital.

The dog came in, happy, but couldn't wag its tail, which didn't have any. She led it into the kitchen and offered it a bowl of water from the tap. She opened the refrigerator; it was full of food. He went to the bedroom, all his clothes were there, even thethat she had taken to the hospital. They had taken care of everything, she thought, but that thought caused her a slight pang, so she dismissed it and began living in her house as usual. Roger's clothes and things were still there. She prepared something for the dog, waiting in front of the electric oven, standing with her hands on the counter, her eyes fixed on something uncertain in front of her, thinking of nothing but the minutes left until it was cooked. When it was ready, the delicious aroma excited the animal, who pounced on the plate of food. Sara watched it happily; it would have company until Roger returned. Then, she cooked something for herself, a mixture of what she had served the dog and other ingredients; she would have time later. The truth was, she felt tired, perhaps even exhausted, without quite knowing why. She went to the dining room, put the computer on the table, and turned it on. As she stirred her plate with her fork, not really wanting to eat, she waited for the screen to show the traditional desktop photo of her and Roger together on their honeymoon. They were younger, it's true, but something struck her as odd. She didn't seem to fully recognize herself. She stood up and went to the living room mirror, a large full-length mirror that she had overlooked when she'd entered, as always, except when she needed to check her hairstyle before leaving. She was almost unrecognizable, extremely thin, her hair cropped to a man, dingy, and her face gaunt, her eyes glossy, her hands with long, bony fingers. She brought them to her face, wondering what had happened to her to turn her into the figure she saw in the mirror. She began to stir, and immediately remembered the phone number they'd left on the dining room table. She searched, but couldn't find it. She remembered she'd taken it to the kitchen and found it on the refrigerator door, held in place by a magnet. She called that number, and without knowing who she was talking to, she asked what had happened.

"Mrs. Levi? Calm down. Look at the time, Sara."

She searched the walls; there must be a clock, she was sure. Her gaze fell on a pendulum clock.

"It's Dr. Farías, Sara. Don't worry, it's normal to feel lost. Tell me, what time is it?"

"A quarter past twelve..."

"Where did you leave the instructions, Sara?"

She thought for a moment, then searched in her purse that was still on the dining room table, now next to the abandoned plate of food and the turned-

on computer. The screen showed 146 unread messages from Roger. She found the paper and read it aloud.

"Okay, Sara. You're 15 minutes overdue for your medication. Take it right now, and don't worry. Go with the first thing that comes to mind, Sara. Don't overthink it; it's bad for your recovery."

"What happened to me, Doctor? I can't remember..."

"Nothing happened that I should remember, Sara."

She hung up the phone. She returned to the computer. She opened Roger's messages. At first, she didn't understand what he was talking about. They were short, lamenting that Sara hadn't answered him. Then, they stopped. She looked at the date on the current screen. They were in January of the year following the last message, and these started in the previous year, but they were deleted, if they had been. She wanted to remember the reason for Roger's trip, but she didn't know exactly. It wasn't mentioned in the preserved messages.

A few days passed, and visitors arrived. One day, her neighbors were happy to see her after so long. Were they aware of what had happened to her? If so, they didn't ask or refer to anything. The absence was something that had happened, and was over. Don't think about those things, Dr. Farías had told her. One afternoon, a woman and a man arrived from the courtroom. They sat on the sofa, across from her, as she sat in the dining room chair, her hands in her lap. They told her she looked very well. Sara put a hand to her face, as if naively confirming this statement. They smiled. They congratulated her on finding the dog's company. The animal was keeping watch under the table, next to Sara's feet. Upon hearing its mention, it gave a growl that wasn't necessarily threatening. A while later, they said goodbye, and until the last moment, the man kept scrutinizing glances at every corner, and the woman kept watching her every move.

One morning, she woke up with something on her mind. She smelled paint in the air, and without thinking, she went in search of the supplies she would need to begin her task. During the night, she had had strange dreams, but without shaking her, they had left a bitter taste in her mouth when she woke up. A taste like lead. He had quickly eaten breakfast and rushed to the room where he kept his painting supplies. He found the palette with dried paint, which he easily removed with paint thinner. He set up the easel andIn the living room, she placed a canvas over it and set about looking for the paint cans. They were all dry. It surprised her, she told herself ironically, that the refrigerator was full and the cupboards were stocked, yet they had forgotten their favorite pastime. But the same irony made her sick, making her nauseous. She had to avoid such thoughts.

She left the house, accompanied by the dog. It was the first time she had gone out since her return. She walked through the streets automatically, until she came to the right store. An old man greeted her with a wide, sincere smile.

"Sara Levi! Praise Jehovah," he said.

She smiled and replied:

"Amen, dear Elijah." Her own words passed through a brief moment of hesitation, but soon they stopped worrying her.

"Where has my favorite disciple been all this time?"

"I was sick, Elijah, but I'm better now."

"I realize, my dear, you're very thin." If my wife were alive, I'd tell her to prepare something delicious for you and bring it home.

"Don't worry, Elias. I've come to renew my paintings."

The old man turned around to rummage through the shelves behind the counter. Sara saw that he was wearing a kippah over his sparse gray hair. She wondered if there was a synagogue nearby; she didn't remember, and she was embarrassed to ask. Lately, she was reconnecting with things from her childhood that she had long put aside. The only thing she remembered with precision was her marriage to Roger.

The old man chose the brands and colors most suited to Sara's style.

"So what are you painting now?" the man asked.

She replied that she had no idea. But she didn't admit that she had no idea what style he had mentioned. She said goodbye and returned home. The dog had waited for her at the door of the shop and faithfully accompanied her back. Meanwhile, she was talking to him, and he was listening, no doubt, without ceasing to watch out for people crossing his path or for something in the air.

That same afternoon, he tried to make a start. He sat down at the easel, with his palette ready on a small table, the brush in his right hand, and the dog sitting to one side, as if waiting. She looked at him, asking:

"What am I going to paint? All this seems familiar, but I don't know how to begin."

Then it occurred to her that she would paint a portrait of the animal. She became enthusiastic about the idea. She couldn't find a better model; the dog was prone to staying still for long hours and getting up only to follow her. She first made a sketch, but after several attempts, it turned out terribly bad. It was possible that she had once been a painter, she told herself, judging by such a terrible result. Then, leaving her brush on the palette, she got up and went to the kitchen. Absently, she took a biscuit from the jar in the cupboard. She returned to the easel, thinking about the drawing she had made. She tore off the canvas and placed a new one. Once again, she paused to think. She sat down and picked up the brush, now distracted, and suddenly realized it was her left hand. The portrait of the dog this time came out practically perfect. It didn't take her long to realize that with that hand, talent and artistic skill were innate. So, when she had finished, she painted the background of the portrait, very similar to the place where they were, but with some invented touches.

For the next few days, she painted tirelessly. She painted each room of the house, then the garden. Almost two weeks later, she left with a portable suitcase, carrying the easel and painting supplies slung over one shoulder. The dog, who still didn't have a name, was at her side. They walked through the streets of the neighborhood until they reached a square. She sat on a bench and set up her things. She looked for a suitable landscape, the trees, the people passing by. Everything turned out natural and extremely close to reality. She was happy, yet she ended the day unsatisfied. The paintings were faithful to the city's ruined state, yet bland. They were like photographs, in such a naive style that any talented child could have painted them. She knew she could do more; there was a kind of immanent talent in her mind, deep inside, that had yet to emerge. Somehow, she was so certain, as if she had once seen it realized on canvas.

She went in search of new motifs. She walked and walked, took taxis to the port area. Seeing the immense river, she thought she had finally found the right object for her art. She painted for several days in the same place, from different perspectives. Boats, docks, cranes, loaders. Everything was interesting to objectify in her painting, and she discovered that was the problem. There was no subjectivation. She sighed deeply, sitting on her improvised stool at the edge of the port. She looked at the men with their large humps carrying weights three times their bodies. Those twisted but muscular shoulders emphasized the size ofThe humps. They came and went carrying bags. When she left them at a warehouse, they returned without the weight, but always twisted and bent. She began to portray them. The result was several paintings with the same theme: groups of people engaged in different activities, always on the move. Their faces were barely visible, but their bodies and their loads were, amidst the foggy atmosphere of a port morning. When she portrayed the same thing at night, when the men's activity ceased and she saw them leaving their workplaces for the street, she made paintings that showed their bodies walking slowly, dispersing in small groups of two or three. Some headed toward the bus stops, others toward nearby bars. Sara followed them to observe them during their coffee chats, their brief revelries late at night. On these occasions, she simply made sketches and trusted her memory. She wasn't afraid of those men, or of the night in the port neighborhood. The dog was with her. Several women standing on street corners saw her pass by, and she saw mocking expressions on their faces. The dog, however, kept them away. The next morning she got up very early to work, and printed on the canvas everything she had seen the night before. In the frenzy of creation, she saw little of the results as she painted. She didn't reflect or was overly methodical in her art; she didn't use previously learned techniques or were conscious of any particular school. Therefore, she took brief breaks to rest when she thought the painting was finished. Ready to start a new one, and before taking it off the easel, she would take a quick look at it, not to make corrections, but to make sure she wasn't repeating herself too much. It was then that she realized that the men she had painted that morning, some of them, didn't have humps. What she considered a mistake in her drawings, making her reproach herself for her incompetence, suddenly turned into fear. She looked for the other paintings that were leaning against the walls,

covered with canvas. All, or almost all, of the human figures, some didn't have humps.

She wondered where she'd gotten the skill to draw them that way, without them looking grotesque. Painting monsters wasn't her specialty, she knew that by now. She wondered if she would correct them. It wouldn't be possible anymore, but she could be more careful from now on. She continued painting, with the idea of discarding those erroneous paintings that didn't portray reality. However, the more she restrained herself, the more attention she paid to her art, the more her conscience dominated her, the more clumsy she began to feel, and the results on the canvas were undeniably pusillanimous. She felt so ashamed of herself that she decided to continue her attempts until she achieved a satisfactory result. She skipped meals, munched crackers or quickly improvised sandwiches before returning to work. The obsession with achieving some worthwhile art didn't allow her to stop. And each painting took so much effort that at the end of each day, contemplating the result, she saw nothing but a kind of spiritless, transcendent photograph. She felt nothing when she looked at them. She destroyed the last one in a fit of rage. The dog sniffed the air, as if smelling more than listening for the signs of violence. Sara sat on the living room sofa, frustrated and weary. When would Roger return? she wondered, as if that were the solution to everything. In him lay the way of being and thinking that complemented her. She looked again at the paintings leaning against the walls, the ones she had considered imperfect. They were, without a doubt, better than the last ones, and soon her head began to hurt.

The following nights, she had strange dreams. She attributed them to tiredness and the boredom of her solitude. She had decided to stop painting for a while. And yet the images presented themselves to her at night, in dreams curiously related to the human groups she had painted or tried to portray. Every night there were more deformed men, men without humps.

When summer ended, the first day of autumn in Buenos Aires appeared cold and cloudy. She got out of bed and took out the winter clothes she kept at the top of the closet. She dressed in corduroy pants and a hand-knit sweater she had made herself once, she couldn't remember when. She looked at herself in the bathroom mirror. Her hair was longer, and she could style it the way she liked best, sometimes gathered at the nape of her neck, in a simple bun, sometimes loose. She had gained weight, and her dark circles were no longer so noticeable. She made herself breakfast and fed the dog.

"I never gave you a name," she said, as she watched him eat from her plate. "What would you like to call yourself?" The animal raised its head. She looked at him and knew the answer in his sightless eyes. "They say the most perfect poet of antiquity was blind. Poets are like prophets, my friend." My name is Sara, so I'll call you after him. You resemble men, imperfect, incapable of certain things, but with a kind of gift for the hidden.

Then someone rang the doorbell. She was surprised; it wasn't a visiting day for the court officials, who had already stopped bothering her unexpectedly and announced their routine interviews in advance. As she delayed coming to the door, she heard the sound of a key in the lock. The dog ran toward the entrance, barking furiously. The key stopped trying. Sara approached and asked who it was. A voice answered her, but the dog's barking made it hard to understand. She tried to silence him, but it was useless. Before opening the door, she thought she heard her name on the other side, in a man's voice.

Sara opened the door a crack, peering through the narrow space. She saw a tall, thin man with a beard and long, graying hair and light eyes. Her heart began to pound in her chest, because even though she didn't recognize him, she was sure it was Roger.

"Sara! It's me! Sara, please open the door!"

Then she opened the door, and the dog lunged at the newcomer. It began to bite the forearm he had used to protect himself. Roger fell to the ground while the dog held him. Seeing Sara's screams, the dog realized it had to let him go. With saliva dripping from its mouth, it left Roger on the floor in the doorway and walked away toward the kitchen, as if to hide, suddenly embarrassed by Sara's harsh reprimand. Roger's left arm was covered in blood. The clothes he was wearing were old and dirty. She tried to help him up, but he looked into her eyes and began to cry desperately. He was weak, excessively thin. His hump bulged like an external skeleton behind him, as if he were carrying another man, smaller but even heavier than himself.

She watched his tears on his gaunt face, but all she could manage was to cover his wounded arm to stop it from bleeding further.

"My God, Sara dear!" Roger said, unable to stop the tears that made him shudder. She felt the trembling in her own body, and a cold fear began to invade her.

"It's been so long since we've seen each other, my love, and you haven't even given me a kiss! You don't seem happy to see me. Don't you realize what I've been through and what I've seen... I'll tell you sometime... But I see something wrong in your eyes, Sara..." And he tried to laugh at the pathetic nature of his situation when he saw the dog still watching him from the kitchen. Laughter and crying merged into a single shudder that prevented him from getting up. His legs were thin; she could feel the bones that seemed to protrude from the ends of his trousers.

"When I recover, my love, we'll be happy. You'll see... I'll tell you what I saw, because it's possible, Sara, it's possible..." he said insistently, as if he had just discovered the most transcendent discovery for humanity. "We'll have a normal child, my dear, a child without a hump..." And as he said this, he tried to caress Sara's cheek with his wounded hand.

Such contact startled her, because she had suddenly sunk into an abyss too deep when she heard her husband's last words. Every memory returned from its exact place in time. Everything took shape with methodical, chronometric precision. And she began to laugh with a terrible laugh that

was fury on the verge of exploding. Roger looked at her without understanding, but she continued laughing as she got up, leaving him on the floor. Returning inside the house, she called the dog, holding onto the door as she felt its body constrict with the terrible laughter she couldn't stop. A whole arsenal of memories suddenly rushed into her mind, and she couldn't bear them without seeing herself destroyed and abolished, prostrate on the floor like the other.

The other, whose existence was an open wound in her mind, was now dying between the dog's teeth, faithful to the new times where the memory of straight-backed men would disappear forever, if they had ever existed.

THE MONKEYS

1

My son's ape-like hand was an unshakeable fact. Before and after that, the world was and would be completely different, and I'm not talking about the way I would see it, but literally and concretely different. It was because of the birth of my little Homer that I began to open my eyes to what I didn't want or wasn't interested in seeing, to pay attention to what had previously passed superficially by my ears. Words slipped through the doors of restaurants and office buildings in the heart of Buenos Aires. Unexplained accidents on avenues and highways, where distracted drivers, or perhaps suddenly overcome by panic, saw things in front of their windshields that were only in their minds, like ancestral memories. They returned like robbers to steal the reason that took man so many centuries to conquer.

Or perhaps they saw, in their hands on the steering wheel, the appearance of something strange, hands that didn't belong to them and yet had always been theirs. Because it's true that since the birth of Homer, I began to notice all that avalanche of evidence that I previously didn't understand out of mere self-absorption in my secluded life, the apparent marital happiness confined to the confines of an apartment in a tall building on Libertador Avenue, not many blocks from the Río de la Plata, wide and groaning with its eternal groans, like a mastodon heading at a dead pace toward the ocean. A river that believes itself to be an ocean.

And that is how we and so many others considered ourselves, unique and unrepeatable, isolated on this continent, turning our backs on the jungle that constitutes the essence of these lands, however much we may dislike it. We look at the old continent, and it looks over our shoulders, confusing our imitated civilization with the barbarism of the countryside or the jungle.

The doctor from the Santa Trinidad Clinic fetched me from the waiting room, where I was sitting in an armchair in front of a large window that let the sun shine over the Plaza. Across the street, the Teatro Colón showed its ruins as it had been slowly dismantled for many months. As I looked at the

crane that was leaning against its ancient walls, I heard Dr. Farías's voice beside me.

"Sir...sir..." he said, tapping me on the shoulder twice, until I decided to tear my gaze away from the death that was demolishing buildings and looked at him, realizing from his eyes that something bad had happened.

"Sir, I need you to accompany me to my office, please."

With his right hand, he gently grasped my left elbow, more delicately than any woman could. He was a young man, heir and owner of that clinic that had belonged to his family for more than two generations, among whose members there had been at least one minister of health.

I let myself be led through the corridors, and I guessed he was taking me to the nursery. The doctor began speaking to me with a smile almost imperceptible to the naked eye; it was more the slowness of his tone that suggested it. The nurses passed us by, their gazes inert. All that whiteness confused me, hypnotized me; even the artwork on the walls was barely blurred sketches without concrete shapes, like clouds against white skies. The afternoon silence was typical of a Sunday, with little traffic. It's true that the clinic's walls were almost soundproof to protect the patients' serenity and allow the doctors to work diligently and focusedly, and that the surrounding streets had been closed for the theater's demolition.

I heard a dull, muffled rumble and knew one of the thick walls was falling. Then Dr. Farías's voice seemed unbearably obscene; it wasn't a scream but a blasphemous chant. A full orchestra collapsed into a crescendo of timpani, which was aborted by the ancient voice of a castrati. Dr. Farías's slight femininity suggested to me the protest, anguish, and despair of his eternal loss.

We reached the nursery window. The cribs were lined up like the ranks of an army. All white with immaculate sheets. I looked closely, eager to be led by the hands of curiosity and enthusiasm. It was my first child, the first Samanta and I had. The doctor's hand rested on the glass, and with his finger he pointed at a crib. At first, I couldn't place which one he was referring to; to me, they all looked the same, just like the babies in them. Then he took me by the chin, and that trust I thought was abusive was the most tragic and at the same time the most tender sign I would receive in a long time. His hand directed my gaze toward a crib in the front row, which I had almost overlooked.

I could see it clearly, separated by exactly a meter on each side of the other cribs. The baby, my son, was sleeping, covered up to his neck by a sheet. His thinning hair was very light, like Samantha's. Maybe it would darken with age, but it didn't matter, of course. I didn't see the color of his eyes, but I felt the need to reach through the glass, pick him up, and rock him.

As I was about to speak, the doctor rapped on the window with a knuckle, which the nurse immediately interpreted.

"Sir, there's something you need to know..."

"What happened to my wife?" I asked. Something was coming at me, as I continued to hear the walls of the theater crumbling forever.

"Your wife is fine, sir, still sleeping in her room." It's your son I want to talk to you about...

Then he signaled to the nurse, who was waiting by the crib, following our silent words through the glass, and she lifted the sheet covering Homer's small body. .

I saw that his right hand was different from his left. It was an ape's hand, not only because of the dark, still-soft hair, but also because of the long fingers, the short thumb, and the more square or almost rectangular palm.

The doctor tried to lead me toward the office, but I placed my hands on the glass, my gaze fixed and rapt on my son's body. The nurse, in agreement with the doctor, had already covered the hand, but I loudly begged her, using gestures and knocking on the glass, not to hide it from me anymore, because she had come between the crib and the window.

"Sir, please come with me to the office."

I didn't move, stuttering out clumsy phrases that I no longer remember, and that probably didn't make any sense. I felt nauseous and bent down, resting my hands on my knees.

"Leandro, please," the doctor insisted, calling me by name for the first time since Samanta and I had consulted him so many months before. I looked up at him, and he led me down the hall to sit on a sofa against a wall in the spacious office we were already familiar with from so many checkups and ultrasounds.

He brought me a glass of water, and a nurse came in to check my blood pressure. I rudely rejected her, and she patiently stepped aside. Such serenity and kindness exasperated me; I wanted to get up and break something, scream, break through the glass, and see once again that it was my son they'd shown me. All the fears Samanta and I had had about the possibility of an illness flashed through my mind. We did genetic tests to verify each other's viability, because the law required it. In reality, she and I knew nothing about those laws, being parents for the first time. The media didn't report much, saturated with sensationalist news and entertainment. There were so many laws, so many regulations, that society had already been immunized against it all. Minds seemed to have adapted to the accommodating ebb and flow of what was already served. Computers paid for essential services and taxes, and work in the city was done in homes and offices. I didn't need to leave our apartment to teach my classes; the students connected to the internet, and I had always taught my Spanish literature courses that way. Samanta was a lawyer, and she no longer went to court to settle cases before a judge.

We visited Dr. Farías purely for pleasure. He performed ultrasounds in the traditional way for certain patients. I had liked that a lot, finding in that doctor a more humanistic than scientific sensibility. But now, at this moment when he was trying to explain to me what he supposedly hadn't

been able to tell me before, I hated him so much that I could have killed him with anything at hand. On his desk was a glass picture frame, and on the treatment cart were scissors and scalpels.

In the midst of all this, I heard him say:

"Leandro, I couldn't have warned you before because there was no indication that the baby would have this characteristic. You know we performed amniotic punctures, because it's routine, and despite the danger it always represents. We've already discussed this before..."

Farías stood up from the chair he'd placed next to me to speak to me closely, in an almost low and slow voice. His lab coat was wrinkled and his tie was crooked, and then I realized it was me who had done that: grabbing him by the coat and shaking him when he wanted the nurse to take my blood pressure. She was no longer there, and the closed door turned the office into a smelly den of white lies.

"Tell me the truth," I ordered Dr. Farías, more with my eyes than with my voice. Many have told me before that the reprobation of my eyes is sometimes crueler than the judgment of my words.

The doctor sat back down in the carved wooden chair upholstered in green corduroy. Everything in the office seemed honorable, or perhaps venerable: the light-colored desk, the matching chairs, the armchair I was sitting in, the paintings by Impressionists on the walls, the coat rack that held the doctor's vicuña coat, a merino wool scarf, and an umbrella with a carved handle. Even the treatment cart was antique, its contents hidden behind a sliding lid. The white curtains cast the sterile light just right for that room.

"Look, Leandro..."

"I would appreciate it, Doctor," I interrupted, "if you would never use my first name again..."

Farías stared at me with deep sorrow; this seemed to pain him more than the reason we had been brought together.

-As you wish, professor... I just need to make you understand that the clinic strictly complies with the requirements established by the Ministry of Health of the Nation. We did all the tests. Studies have been conducted to detect any known genetic disease or malformation. But the truth is that your son's illness has been very little studied yet. It was barely seven years ago that the first case was recorded, although it was known that there had been unreported cases before.

"But what is it, for God's sake?"

"Professor, I can't tell you what I don't know, and no one really knows. Some studies have appeared, but the cases recorded and followed over the years are not yet sufficient to determine a more or less certain origin. We know that it's a regression, apparently genetic information that over the millennia became regressive, and that now for some reason has become dominant, and therefore manifests itself morphologically."

I was left wondering what that implied by simple deduction.

"Morphologically, and functionally too, of course, I suppose. Including the psyche."

The doctor smiled sadly.

"Physiologically, yes, but we know nothing about the psychology of those affected." The first cases have been missed because they occurred in South African towns devastated by civil wars. Those that occurred in Europe continue to be monitored, but the children are no older than five or six.

"And how many are there so far?"

"According to the latest records, five hundred worldwide. In South America, there's a research center in Brasilia, and a rehabilitation center in Montevideo. Here in Buenos Aires, maybe one or two."

When he said this, his gaze became haughty, almost proud, I could say. And then the calm that had already dominated my despair during the conversation returned.

"I have the impression, Doctor, that you know more than you're letting on. All this must be on any network dedicated to health information..."

"Don't be so sure of that. The ministries of each country decide their priorities."

I laughed at such naiveté and rubbed my wet eyes.

"Don't degrade your intelligence, Dr. Farías, by lying to me like that." Few people look for information online, let alone in medical journals. Five hundred cases in seven years isn't an epidemic. If, as you say, the ministry's regulations are so strict, this clinic should have complied with them regarding my son's illness. I know you've had relatives in the government, and the influence undoubtedly continues, it's evident. I've heard things on the street, doctor, things that only now come to mind, as if they were once a piece of paper stored in files I'm only just opening. And it feels like a Pandora's box...

Farías didn't respond, waiting. His face was cold, sad, but above all resentful. I saw him get up from his chair, slowly unbutton his lab coat, place it on the coat rack, then take off his tie and hang it up as well. He went to the bathroom, and I heard the tap running, and I imagined he must be washing his face, scrubbing it with gusto and looking at himself in the mirror. He returned, drying himself with a hand towel, which he placed over the back of the chair where he'd been sitting. All this domestic carelessness disconcerted me for a moment, but I realized I'd found Dr. Farías's weak spot. His shirt was open halfway down his chest, and among the hair, I discovered the large lettering marked forever. Part of the ministry's regulations, converted into law by the legislative system, approved by both houses a long time ago. All information, absolutely all information, had to be recorded, and therefore everything was a stigma. The physical and psychological, apprehended or congenital behaviors. The fetus, or rather, the embryo as a source of information about the future.

Diabetes, strokes, cancers, malformations, psychoses, schizophrenia, pedophilia, murder.

"Even homosexuality can be determined before birth, and you tell me that my son's condition, so serious and so disconcerting, hasn't been detected."

Farías slumped in his chair, but soon regained his arrogance.

"And what would you have done, Professor, if you knew what your child would be like? Would you have been willing to abort it?"

I would have liked to smash that pedantry in your voice and face deep into your skull with a mighty blow.

"I don't know what I would have done, I only know what you had to do..."

Before I could finish, he stood up and opened his shirt further, revealing the full extent of the large lettering on his chest.

"Do you have anything to identify you, Professor? I have survived and achieved much despite this writing. Since long before the time of Hawthorne's novel, you know it better than I do, and it doesn't matter what the writing is, or the language. A letter marked with thousands of numbers in barcodes only perceptible to the sensors of any public or private institution, bank or financial institution. And for the ignorant general public." The large print anyone can see.

His voice trembled, and then I knew Dr. Farías must have been doing this for a long time. Waiting and studying the cases sufficiently to avoid being discovered, until he met me. Without a doubt, the strangeness of my son's illness was a double-edged sword for him, a risk that must have stimulated him. He must have been tired of so much trivial and even useless revenge. Now he had encountered a stigma greater than his own.

"Do you see those volumes in my library, Professor? You must have noticed them when you came in, but few people pay attention to books anymore. It's a collection of old medical journals from the last century. There's a forensic medicine case that really caught my attention: a man who was born deformed by the common use of forceps at that time, kidnapping pregnant women to do the same thing and create monsters."

I don't know why, I almost burst out laughing, full of sad sarcasm. But since that was a total disrespect to my wife and son, all I could manage was to get up and grab Farías by the shirt with my left hand and start punching him with my right. His thin body fell to the floor with all his weight, and my limited strength as a schoolteacher couldn't hold him up for long either. He didn't scream; I could only hear the ripping of his white shirt and the body falling to the carpet. But my anger didn't let go, so I went to the desk and grabbed an old clipboard. It had an inscription from the National Academy of Medicine dedicated to the other Dr. Farías, a former minister.

I was going to stick it into the body of his descendant, probably the last of the Farías. But when I heard his crying, I thought of Homer, of the baby whom I had yet to see cry or hold in my arms. Then I leaned over the doctor and dried his face with my handkerchief, and when I was about to

help him up, he grabbed my head and kissed me on the lips. A short kiss, a tragic and anguished kiss.

He seemed to calm down after that. I left with cancer from the pain in my chest.

2

We arrived at the institution Dr. Farías recommended. According to him, it was the only center with the capacity to care for our Homer, at least for the first few years of his life, while the necessary tests were performed. He had already arranged for the birth to be registered with a research foundation dedicated to Rumpelstiltskin disease. When I heard that name, I sincerely believed the doctor was making fun of our suffering, perhaps in revenge for the blow I had given him in his office. He looked at me, guessing from my expression.

"That's the name of the doctor who studied her most assiduously," he told me. There was no mockery or sarcasm other than that of fate itself.

As the car sped along the highway north of Buenos Aires, I watched my son wrapped in his wool coat and in my wife's arms. Samanta kept her eyes on the windshield, occasionally checking to see if the little one showed any expression of discomfort. Twice his monkey-like hand peeked out from the long, wide sleeves of his coat, which she immediately took care to hide.

The dwarf in the Grimm fairy tale seemed to be dancing around us; sometimes I even thought I saw him outside the windows, running alongside the car from one side to the other or making noises on the roof. We had decided to take a taxi, of course; neither of us was sufficiently nervous to drive. The taxi driver watched us in the rearview mirror, ready to start a conversation, but our sad faces made him give up several times during the drive.

Finally, we parked in front of the entrance to a villa in San Isidro. Behind the privet fences were brick walls, and through the large gate, we saw the Victorian-style mansion that had once belonged to an important writer and editor. Now, there, where imagined ghosts had once lived, they took shape through the vicissitudes of economic or social reality, or whatever you want to call it. They found their way into the reality of those beings who had lived for some time in those rooms converted into nursing homes. From now on, there would be only one child with my son's illness, until another came along. The others, according to what I had been told, were mentally or physically ill, deformed, hydrocephalic, with Down syndrome, and many other strange conditions. But all were children no older than eleven. The institution was managed and the staff trained by the best specialists. Many eminent doctors specializing in congenital diseases came from abroad, but these visitors met at conferences outside the mansion, usually in Buenos Aires. The tranquility of the hallways and gardens of the large houseIt

wasn't disturbed by hurried footsteps or voices that didn't belong to the patients themselves.

It was a cloudy day, excessively humid, with a drizzle that never came, and the wait for it was more annoying than its constant threat. The taxi driver stopped the car but didn't turn off the engine, nor did he even go to open the trunk containing the suitcase containing the belongings we had bought during the pregnancy for Homer's future life. Samanta had leisurely gathered all those things the night before, without allowing me to help her. I remember her folding each piece of clothing and putting it neatly in the suitcase, wrapping each toy in cellophane and placing it in a separate bag. There were teddy bears, miniature cars, and a construction set whose tiny bricks we weren't sure she could grasp with her ape-like hand. Everything was carefully wrapped up, both of us weary of the pain accumulated in those weeks since we left the clinic, and the decision not to file any kind of lawsuit or claim was made out of resignation, especially with the enormous fatigue we were carrying.

I got out of the car and opened the trunk. I took out the suitcase and the bag of toys. Then I helped Samanta out. The baby woke up, and his brown eyes looked up at the gray sky above us. I think he smiled. The beauty of his face was rustic, naturally splendid, without any trace of artifice. His curly, dark hair was already long by what was customary for a baby a little over a month old, but he didn't seem to need any grooming in keeping with society's expectations. I remember the day I bathed him for the first time at home. Samanta hadn't wanted to do it, cloistered in her room, without even breastfeeding him. I bought powdered milk, preparing it in the bottle according to the instructions in the pamphlet they'd given us at the clinic for new parents. Several days later, I threw away the pamphlet and followed my instincts, but mostly the instinct I saw in Homer's face. He somehow seemed to tell me when and how to care for him. He didn't cry loudly; he only made moans and occasionally cried, indicating the discomfort of his dirty diapers. When I bathed him for the first time, I washed him carefully, afraid of hurting him, not daring to run my fingers through his monkey-like hand. I watched it out of the corner of my eye, avoiding it as if it didn't exist. Just as I was finishing and about to dry him, that hand rested on my forearm. I felt the touch of wet hair, and it was a totally different sensation from the rest of his body. I believed, for an infinitesimal instant, that another being had touched me, and then I had the equally fleeting thought that the one touching me was a man. Then I picked him up, taking him out of the water, and carrying him in my arms to the double bed, where Samanta was lying, dressed, watching television. She looked at me in surprise and said she was going to wet the whole bed. I smiled because I knew I was going to overcome that sullenness and resentment. I began to dry Homer vigorously, playfully, while he began to laugh loudly as well, defending himself with his arms. Then I also dried Homer's monkey hand and then brought it close to my face to smell it. The smell of wet hair was different from his hair. It was softer and smelled like the traditional baby scent. But the hand had a scent that slowly suggested musk to me, sometimes pine, and other times, later, and when he was hospitalized, the smell of manure under the dead leaves of a forest.

Samanta didn't come over to share that moment with us. Her sense of smell was closed to imagination, and only open to the disaster of reality.

Two weeks later, she asked me to take her to the institution. I saw her growing increasingly frantic and irritable. Every hour I spent away from home, or working in the office where I taught, seemed like an uphill climb of worries. I knew she had returned to her job and spent hours in her own study filled with books on law and jurisprudence. So much knowledge hadn't allowed her to give in, because that was what I thought she should do: give way to her feelings by demolishing the constructs of idealism. Because she wasn't a lawyer content to broker professional arrangements where money came and went in exchange for small or large concessions to true justice. Besides, what do you call true justice, or merely justice? Her father and grandfather were lawyers; even her mother had specialized in divorces, becoming famous in Buenos Aires for the way she reconciled unhappy marriages. What everyone in our family considered a merit was now a contradiction, an instrument of destruction for the small society that was our close family. Because even though he considered the feeling of love as its foundation, it was not possible for him to understand that this construction could not bebe maintained with anything other than the scaffolding of ideality. Whatever emerged outside of it belonged to the imprudent, to that which should be avoided, and if it emerged within the construction itself, or even formed part of the walls themselves—because what is our own body, or the bodies of our loved ones, but walls with which we have no choice but to establish daily, intimate, unconditional contact, in order to enter the realms of the soul?—the construction had to be paralyzed with a sealing strip. The files would ruminate angrily on the courtroom shelves, awaiting transcription into the digital system, when skilled employees had enough time to do so. And when that was accomplished, the smell of decay would no longer be felt, because abstract numbers smell of nothing. I would have liked to explain to him that even those numbers are read by someone at some point, numbers that unleash memories that have aromas, because imagination is closely linked to fiction, and all fiction is actually a distant memory in the imprecise numbers of genetic combinations.

I could smell, that day of my son's bath, the ancient, the vastly remote aroma of the ancestral. I felt it in the tips of my fingers when I touched the ape's hand, when I caressed it the day we abandoned him at the institution. Because it was an abandonment when Samanta and I climbed the short entrance stairs, then through the wood and glass door into the old rooms, crowded with the taste of civilization, with their display cases and vases. It was a museum that concealed, deep within, through the hallways and behind the doors of the rooms, another museum of phenomena that needed to be treated, helped, contained, according to the canons of our civilization, experienced in discerning what is not normal and cannot coexist with the rest.

We were greeted by a woman who introduced herself as the director of the place. She was elderly, and I thought I recognized her face from some current affairs magazine or newspaper, but from many years ago.

"I'm Dr. Moreau, nice to meet you."

We shook hands, and she immediately approached to meet our son. She didn't offer the usual cuddles, but instead treated him as if we were entrusting her with the care and treatment of a poorly assembled mechanical part.

"Rest assured, the little one will receive the best care and treatment."

I wanted to at least shake off the feeling of guilt that was eating away at my nerves, but when I was about to speak, she asked us to accompany her to her office. As soon as we entered, a nurse was waiting for us, and right in front of us, she told us we could leave the child in her care. Samanta looked at her, surprised for the first time since Homer was born, as if this moment, which we all knew was coming, was suddenly unexpected. She handed me the baby to hold. When I did, she sat in an armchair across from the doctor's desk, who was already seated, with the window partially covered by the heavy red corduroy curtains overlooking the large park. Samanta leaned over the desk and began to read the admission papers. I saw her scan the room, studying line after line, page after page of extensive papers. The doctor waited patiently, glancing at me. Homer was calm in my arms, sometimes looking at me or up at the high ceilings of the room. His ape-like hand slipped out of his sleeve and began to move restlessly, extremely gesticulating, while his parchment-like, hairy fingers clenched and unclenched, at times with only his index finger extended. For a few moments, I thought I saw her drawing letters in the air. I quickly dismissed that thought and saw the nurse watching me impatiently.

"Professor, it would be best for you to let the nurse take care of the child from now on..."

I didn't see the nurse's eyes clearly, only the hands that touched me to hold the child. I think I must have looked pale, with an idiotic expression that would have embarrassed me to be aware of it. I did what they asked, and I didn't even notice when they left and the door closed. Samanta continued reading, or at least pretended to, as I had so often seen her do when she was thinking and reflecting on a particularly complicated case. That was her defense, the cloistering behind the walls of impenetrable knowledge. Then I saw her sign each page of the hospitalization agreement. Then she leaned back in the chair again and extended her arm with the pen without looking at me.

The doctor asked me to sit in the other chair next to my wife. He handed me the copy of the agreement, I grabbed it and began to read it without moving from the back of my chair. Two minutes passed, I turned aroundI reread the pages several times, rereading them more than twice. I crossed my legs, took a cigarette from my pocket, and lit it while both of them looked at me disapprovingly.

"Smoking is not allowed in this institution, Professor."

"I don't think anyone who is admitted here will be harmed more than they already are."

I continued reading, but my mind was reeling from violent scenes of madness and murder perpetrated by a peaceful man, a literature professor, about a series of women who would be raped, killed, and dismembered by that same seemingly peaceful man. I was trembling, and I know they noticed. But what had been so easy for me in Dr. Farías's office was impossible here. It was no longer a matter of assigning blame, because now I was the one to blame for what was happening. I could no longer tell Samanta, because with her signature alone, there would have been no hospitalization. The law required the express permission of both of us, and for that reason, and without the imagination or courage to do anything more than rave about ridiculous scenes of melodrama, I grabbed the pen that Samanta hadn't let go of the entire time I'd taken, as if thereby demonstrating that what one of us did was a consequence of the other, joining her in a legal bond—the only one that would unite us from then on—in something that I found more akin to criminal complicity.

We left the mansion without being allowed to visit the inner rooms or the other floors. But first, Dr. Moreau—and every time I saw her, I paid no more attention to her words than to the physiognomy of her face, which each time was more similar to what I imagined the profile of Wells's character to be—asked us to approach the large window behind her desk. The warm midday light settled slowly and firmly on the glass. A solemn but natural silence dominated everything. Not even the sounds of cars on the nearby streets came as a nuisance, but were filtered through the dense, humid air of the park and the thick, ancient walls. It was a place where time had stagnated in the architectural space, and the only sounds were the whistling of the wind through the willow leaves and pine branches, the gardeners' rake sweeping through the dead leaves. Occasionally, the sound of the entrance gate opening and closing automatically at the command of the intercom from some internal room where the security system was located. There must have been hidden cameras somewhere, although I couldn't find any on that first visit.

I heard a very soft scream, shrill but suddenly attenuated, like a hand covering a mouth. I looked at Dr. Moreau (here I must make a comment that would redeem her from certain literary horrors: at some point she told me she was descended from the Moreau and Justo families, eminent old politicians). She avoided my gaze and turned to Samanta, perhaps believing I would find in my wife a certain weakness of character that would be easier to overcome than mine.

"Try not to worry, dear. Your little boy is in the best place in Buenos Aires," she said, raising her arms in a gesture of her surroundings, like a theater actress or an opera diva at the end of an act.

But she soon realized that my wife was different from how she had imagined. Her mind didn't function the way one would expect a traditional housewife to, but rather, she reacted strictly like an honorable and cold lawyer when the sentimental side of her personality threatened to take over her life.

"Let's go home," I said, because I needed to prepare myself to think about what I would do. For Samanta, it was perhaps the final chapter of a corny novel; for me, it was the beginning of a journey of discovery.

We left, escorted to the front door by the doctor. We walked to the gate, followed by her gaze, which I sensed was watchful and even sarcastic. I decided to shake off those bitter and distrustful thoughts. I knew that Samanta, through other means, had come to the same conclusion; it was evident from her expression, but unfortunately, all of that didn't help us communicate better.

We walked in silence and saw that the taxi had left. We rang the intercom to call for another. There was no answer, but we decided to wait. The lawn looked splendid in the sun, the windows of the mansion gleamed, and every now and then the shutters opened, revealing a woman cleaning. It was as if there were no patients there. We knew it was an institution for disabled children, most of them immobilized and silent, autistic, or whatever. They might even be on medication to maintain their serenity. While we waited, the same nurse who had taken Homer crossed the driveway and waved to us, turning toward the back of the house. She was young, in a strictly uniform. A white being, without a cap, just her dark brown hair pulled back in a high bun that let a few unruly strands escape. Samanta realized the other woman was watching her closely; I could tell. That slight tinge of jealousy made me crave her for the first time in a long time.

Then we heard the new taxi approaching and got in. Back home, we felt like returning from a funeral. It was exactly the same feeling of sadness, relief, and disorientation. The ordinary and personal seemed strange and alien. The things in the apartment seemed useless, disorienting, or superficial. We both thought, without realizing it, about going into our respective offices and working. She changed her clothes in the bedroom; I followed her. Sitting back to back, one on each side of the bed, we undressed and put on lighter clothes again. It was suddenly cold, and I turned on the heater.

Samanta said:

"They're coming this afternoon to pick up the nursery furniture; it's from a charity." Then she asked me: "Are you going to have lunch?"

I shook my head silently. She left to go into her office. She had called yesterday, or maybe earlier, to donate our son's things. It was a failure that had to be dismissed. I delved into that failure and decided to dissect it until I found the formula for its origin.

3

There was a period of almost two years, which served as a preamble to Homer's true story, really like everything I've told so far. My profession, dedicated to literature, makes me fond of these parallels, these allegories, this whimsical way of telling stories. This period began when we left our

son in the institution, and it was when Samanta began to concentrate more and more on her work. She had gotten into the habit of getting up earlier and going straight to court, when I knew she didn't need to. She would return at noon and lock herself in her office until after six in the evening. When she left, she would approach me, usually in my reading chair, when my own grading and student consultation work had already been completed for the day. I liked to sit there after returning from my visits to Homer. She never wanted to accompany me. After many insistences, and long, useless discussions that she concluded with a professional summary, I continued to harangue and insist, perhaps trying to convince myself who was right.

In any case, she would have been a nuisance in the end on those visits. I had gotten used to doing it three times a week, the maximum routine allowed by the institution's regulations. The nurse made me wait in a playroom I had seen the second time I went, now alone, and it made a pleasant impression on me at first. The solitude of that room, however, saddened me. I thought I'd arrived too early, and that other children would soon be arriving, brought in by the staff, and I was undoubtedly very curious to meet the rest of the people who lived there. The room was large, with long armchairs and soft rugs, with cushions where the children could lie down or play freely without getting hurt. There were toys of all kinds, dolls or rubber animals, plastic cars, almost all of them large, and intelligence games in boxes neatly stored on high shelves in old closets. Continuous music played, and I thought I recognized strings being plucked or bowed, and it was undoubtedly music by Mozart or even Baroque music, with arrangements specially made for those institutions, all signs of conflict or density erased. Mozart mixed with bleach, I told myself. And although the smell of disinfectants didn't match that place, the aroma of the sterile lingered in the air, suspended like floating corpses. Like ghosts that haven't died, or immortal thoughts.

Then the nurse brought Homer to me in her arms. Every week, he grew bigger. I asked if they were feeding him well, if he hadn't been sick. She responded condescendingly, smiling at me as if I were a child. What could I do but go along with it and let her think I was, a grown boy with a strange son, a boy who daydreamed while reading and thought that reality was more imprecise than literature, more confusing, and that it had to be grasped with a dissector's tweezers, and always doubted.

Homer grew rapidly in those months, as did the extension of his simian features. His dark, coarse, slightly curly hair extended toward his forearm. He smiled at me, and I cradled him throughout visiting hours. Sometimes I laid him on the rug and brought him toys; his eyes shone, and he tried to grasp them with his small fingers. His simian hand was less dexterous, with difficulty grasping. Sometimes I suspected that he wasn't being looked after properly, that he was thin, or that he was dirty. Then I would strip him and check him. I was searching for something different, but it seemed to me that everything was fine, and he smiled at the tickling I did. And his monkey-like hand played with my fingers, squeezing them, and I felt that hand cherishing me, and I began to realize then, very surreptitiously at first, that that hand was claiming me, calling me with a silent cry of

anguish and despair. The hair on the back of my hands stood on end at such moments, and a chill did the same in my chest and head. I thought of my wife, and I realized that she hadn't understood, which was why it was better for her not to come. And what I thought was selfishness and coldness, perhaps she had known all of this long before I did. They, women, know and suffer because they intuit with the same certainty with which men only do so when they learn. And because they know beforehand, they are implacable.

Ninety days later, we received the bill for the first quarter. We knew Homero's hospitalization and treatment wouldn't be cheap. Dr. Farías had told us that Dr. Moreau's institution was partially subsidized by the state, so her fees weren't excessive. However, when I opened the envelope and read the amount for three months—and that it would be the same for years to come, perhaps more due to inevitable inflation—I sank into my usual armchair with the note in my hand. It was seven in the evening. Night was falling, and the light from the nightstand lent a warm, comfortable intimacy to my favorite spot among the books. Samanta came into the library and looked at me. Before asking, she saw the bill in my hands and realized. She only leaned closer to grab it and read it. I saw nothing but disgust on her face, and then a wry smile.

"I expected it. I didn't tell you anything before so as not to worry you, but this is typical. Farías' clinic and Dr. Moreau's house did their business."

"But they're supposed to be subsidized by the state..."

"That's right, but that saves them barely ten percent of their total annual budget. What's best for them is institutional propaganda. There are a couple of senators who have arranged the official subsidy, but in reality, they charge much more."

"So what do we do? I don't think we can pay unless we sell the apartment..."

She interrupted me without looking at me:

"Don't be absurd. I'll take care of this. I saw it coming and I've been making some plans."

When she turned to return to her office, I muttered something resentfully. Samanta stopped and looked at me like the guy I used to see when he was fully immersed in his profession. She didn't need to say anything to me, nor apologize for not sharing any of it with me. For now, I needed a lawyer, and there I had the best one, without charging me anything. I watched her close the door, and a turn of her head made her hair move against the frame. Then she disappeared, but I kept thinking about that lock of hair, and the memory of her scent and her texture on my hands and lips made me miss her as if I'd lost her forever.

The lawyer had gone back to work, but my wife had been buried by the other one.

Samanta filed a civil lawsuit against Dr. Farías's clinic for damages of two million dollars. She knew they could pay, and even if the result was lower, she was absolutely certain we would win. She had me sign the joint lawsuit the same day we were due to pay the first quarterly payment at the clinic. Since she knew I was going to visit Homero that afternoon, she instructed me not to discuss the case with Dr. Moreau. They had already been informed through court proceedings about the suspension of payments until the case was resolved, and the investigating judge had ordered Homero's treatment to continue.

In the afternoon, I went to the mansion and found nothing had changed. I felt guilty about the attitude of responsibility that had always been instilled in me. I knew our cause was, of course, just, and if they had such fraudulent, though officially legalized, arrangements, I shouldn't feel the way I did. I feared petty reprisals from the staff, especially the headmistress. But over the next few weeks, after exploring the nurse's gaze, corroborating Homer's physical condition, and the way he was treated, I found no difference.

Other children appeared during visiting hours, and I met their parents. Generally, there were no more than two or three playing on the mats at a time, and only my son was still a baby. The mothers looked at me condescendingly, eager to give me advice because they thought I was inexperienced and indecisive, but they didn't speak to me until I asked them something about how long their children had been hospitalized.

"Two years," replied one of the very elderly women, whom I at first thought was the child's grandmother. He was a boy ofA giant head, a sunken chest, rounded shoulders, he walked slowly and very hunched over. He must have been almost ten years old.

"My son has been here since he was born," a father told me, holding his probably five-year-old son, asleep. He had a prognathous chin and an elongated skull. I approached because I was curious to get a better look at him. Trying to hide my fears so he wouldn't feel offended, I spoke to him about lost oxen.

"Don't worry," the father replied. "Here we talk without offending each other. We're beyond any pride, don't you think?"

I nodded and stood with Homer in my arms. The man cradled his son, and, looking from his son to mine, he said:

"I think we're very distant relatives, but at the end of the day..."

At first, I didn't understand, but I thought I understood what he was saying. His son had a face similar to that of an ape. "They told me my son was born like that for no apparent reason. I had learned from my parents that at one time they were born like that because of the use of forceps, but I'm talking about more than sixty or seventy years ago. The doctors say they've been appearing from time to time since then. It's been a long time now, some have died, others are locked up. And yours?"

I already knew you'd seen Homer's ape-like hand.

"They say it's a somewhat new disease..."

"They're transforming," the man said trivially, wiping his son's drool with a handkerchief.

"How?"

"I don't really know more than I imagine. Variations, sir, where nature makes its way. And I call nature something that's coming, something tremendous in my opinion..." He made a notch of disgust at a kind of pain in his head.

"Are you okay?"

He smiled.

"It's this background music, it disgusts me." If Mozart rose from his grave...

"What do you do?" I asked, because I already knew the answer.

"I'm a musician, but for now unemployed. We were kicked out of the Buenos Aires district when the Teatro Colón closed. I played tuba in the orchestra. A third generation of instrumentalists, can you imagine? A third generation, and now everything's gone, and on top of that, music is forever bastardized..."

She made a gesture of irremediable resignation and once again wiped the saliva dripping from the corners of her sleeping son's mouth.

Many months passed like this, until a year and a half after Homero's birth, the court verdict was issued. Samanta waited all day sitting in her office. I knew she was nervous, but when I went out to get something to eat in the kitchen, I noticed she was as controlled as ever. Up until the day she gave birth to our son, she had determined not to complain about the pain of the impending birth. The cesarean section had been scheduled for two weeks later, and yet the advance notice wouldn't have unsettled her; her temperament wouldn't allow it. I envied her that way of being. For me, anxiety caused insecurity, which led to anger, always suppressed. It's unreasonable, I know, and she constantly reproached me for it. But I couldn't abide by her ways and customs. It was as if I were comparing judicial verbosity with poetic literature. The ancient and forceful synthesis of the latter with the rhetorical and fallacious ways of the courthouse.

Justice, I told myself, as I watched my wife walk in and out of her office, awaiting the ruling, is not the law. Just as that awaited ruling would not be justice either. The woman with the scales and a blindfold, one of the most beautiful icons, is such an elusive figure that lawyers and judges have given up on reaching her for too long now. They've created their own mediocre system that they pretend to call justice. And that's what Samanta was waiting for: a call from her secretary in the Buenos Aires courts.

Then the phone rings in her office. I hear it despite the closed door. Her voice sounds very low, and I can't understand. I approach the door because I'm nervous too; my soul has also resorted to the childish resource to calm

the spirits that reality requires to continue. I think of Homer, of the tranquility of his life in the mansion, and if that depends on the clever tricks of the law, then they're welcome.

Suddenly the door opens, and Samanta, who caught me snooping, laughs because she's happy.

"We did it! We won the verdict!" She hugged me as tightly as she hadn't done in a long time.

I didn't know what to say; I felt agitated and began to ask obvious questions with a kind of stutter. As I hugged her, Homer's face was between us. "My love," I said, kissing her face and holding her in my hands, "the best lawyer in the world..."

She continued laughing, and it was like having her back after so many years. That laugh she had when we first met, perhaps because the imminence of love hadI had taken from their neutral spheres.

"Now Homer's future is secured..."

Samanta looked at me, and I realized she hadn't been paying attention, because suddenly her enthusiasm faded, refocusing on other points, another parallel reality.

"I have a lot of calls to make," she said as she turned to return to her grief. It was two in the afternoon.

"Let's go visit Homer, please, dear... let's go together at least this once... I know you were worried, and you felt responsible, but now that you've secured his life, there's no reason to hide your feelings..."

My wife looked back at me, this time with clear acrimony in her expression.

"Don't analyze me, Leandro," was all she answered.

It was true. I had neither the reason nor the knowledge to do so, but I also wondered who the woman with whom he had fathered a child really was. Samanta locked herself in her office, but not before knocking on the door, which wasn't her custom, even when she was angry. I didn't go to see Homer; I felt responsible for Samanta's anger, and I was worried. It was time for dinner, and I called her.

"Shall we have dinner, my love?"

She opened the door and walked past me without looking at me. She was carrying a few papers and folders in her arms. I saw her enter the library, turn on the light, and sort them into her section of the shelves. I followed her and approached her back, touching her shoulders. However, her indifference hurt me more than any angry shout.

"Do you know I love you?" I said softly behind her right ear.

"I know," she replied.

I expected a response, but those are things that don't happen in love, but in a game. And love is anything but chance.

Throughout the week, the television newscasts called home hour after hour. Samanta arranged interviews in the studios, others online from her office, and others from the office she shared with the law firm she worked for. They wanted to talk to me, but since I completely refused, the only way to avoid them was to stay in the apartment. I couldn't visit my son for almost ten days, as the journalistic alert tape dwindled. Everything was already known: Dr. Farías's famous clinic had been ordered to pay two million dollars. The doctor appeared on television several times, as the sole face of a business group that remained anonymous, and for which he would undoubtedly be held completely responsible. The Farías family's fortune was not that great, and its prestige had been achieved at the expense of politics. My wife knew all this, and so the media began to talk about Samanta's possible candidacy for a seat in the next parliamentary term. When almost two weeks had passed, we were at home, having a silent dinner, when I asked him:

"Is there any news from Dr. Moreau? I haven't seen anything on television."

"If you're worried about the journalists finding you at the clinic door, that's not a problem, really. I don't think they've found out where Homero is hospitalized; I did everything possible to avoid it. But even if they are, it wouldn't be a problem for you to give a brief and concise statement. They'd be satisfied with that and wouldn't come looking for you again. They keep asking me about my husband, and sometimes I don't know what to say to them."

I kept thinking: they asked me that same thing when I went to visit our son. But everything was already irreconcilable between us; there was no way back now.

The news about the court ruling and the amount of the lawsuit continued to be felt. The Holy Trinity Clinic had reduced its care. Several doctors resigned, and bankruptcy was certain and imminent. Only Dr. Farías's obstinacy prolonged this agony, Samanta told me.

"I should declare my assets once and for all and put an end to this Passion." He made a gesture of weariness as he brought the fork to his mouth. "This habit you men have of the tragic, of sacrifice, but of the supposedly masculine ego, is characteristic of your Christian mysticism, gloomy and bloody."

She was so right that I suddenly felt myself rising in pride like few times before. She shouldn't be a congresswoman, I told her.

"You should run for judge, my dear. And for the Supreme Court."

I hurt her, I know, because that's what she wanted. Maybe she even needed to be hurt in her real feelings, not just her professional ego. But for her to finally give in, I had to be a different man than I was.

It had been almost a year since we had made love. That night we did. Samanta, literally offended, allowed herself to be driven by resentment and took revenge on me by offering me the best of our entire life together, determined never to offer it to me again. I cherish that memory like a stigma.

More than a month passed. The clinic was closed. Samanta didn't tell me anything about the case anymore, just gave me a signature. r the documents that corresponded to me as the plaintiff, since she was listed as my lawyer. When she approached my desk, moved the literature books aside, and placed this or that document, leaning over to point out an important paragraph, I would then smell the scent of her hair. In those moments, I think she would have surrendered to my one word, because I know that despite everything, she was doing all this for her son, to ensure his future, in the only way she knew how to do it with complete certainty and effectiveness. I wasn't sure about the other way, with her feelings. The doorbell rang, and I got up to answer it. I had Samanta's gaze on my back, which I knew was shiny and distressed because I ended up not saying that one word.

It was the postman with a brief note bearing the clinic's logo. I didn't show it to her; I just scratched the envelope and tore it open. It was a message from Dr. Farías. He wanted to see me that night at the clinic. Samanta had gone to her office, unconcerned about who had called. Things follow their fateful course. If this had happened, if I hadn't done this, those were expressions that made no sense. The truth is that Samanta wasn't there to stop me from going to see Farías. And why would I go see him? Perhaps a question, or a reproach, or a call to violence.

I left the house without telling Samanta. I had the message in my pants pocket. I drove over and parked on the avenue next to the sidewalk, already quiet at that time of night. It was after ten, and the lights of the now definitively closed clinic were off. I knocked on the front door, dark and as desolate as if the building had been uninhabited for many years. Even the sidewalk hadn't been swept in several days. There were scraps of papers, perhaps the remains of torn medical records. There were pieces of fabric torn into tiny shreds, perhaps sheets that had once sheltered the children born there. I wondered, for a moment, if I was in Buenos Aires, because the city seemed unusually deserted. I looked up and saw the ruins of the theater still there, slowly torn away by the trucks that now rested around them. Perhaps a new skyscraper would soon take its place; even the clinic would be demolished to make way for a new multi-story parking garage.

The intercom rang, and I pushed open the door. I walked through the same hallways and went up the same elevator I had used so many times before. When I reached Farías's office floor, I felt the same shudder I'd felt when he led me to the nursery window. This time everything was dark, only the streetlight filtered through uncertain cracks into the desolate rooms, where all the furniture remained the same as always, perhaps, though I couldn't

quite make it out, probably with the beds' wrinkled sheets or the bathrooms filthy. It had all been so recent, the entire crisis clustered around the clinic, like a tick that rapidly swelled, deteriorating the building, aging it prematurely.

What could Farías have been trying to tell me? I wondered with every step I took along the hallway toward the consulting room. He hadn't told me where to find him; I assumed it would be in his office. Only then did the strangeness of that meeting dawn on me. There was no longer any chance to convince me to drop the lawsuit, which would have been a logical reason before the ruling. The mandatory conciliation and settlement meetings were dismissed by the accusing party, the requirements for a meeting exclusively between lawyers having been met. Everything was over now, the clinic closed, Dr. Farías's prestige moribund. But above all, Homer's future was assured.

I reached the office door. I knocked, but no one answered. Suddenly, I heard the sound of breaking glass behind me. In the shadows, the explosion caused intermittent flashes of light, absurd reflections of streetlights torn from the streets and dragged by the glass that fell to the ground, and beyond the window, now forever open, the empty cradles looked like bowls or vessels molded by primitive hands. For a long moment, I believed the flashes had been stars fallen from an immense sky, and the chill that ran through me echoed like a cool breeze from some distant river. The sounds of cars on 9 de Julio Avenue perhaps simulated the incessant flow of water.

And among the cradles, nothing moved, only an army of bowls, perhaps canoes ready to be lowered into the current of a long, ancient river. A river of slow, dense, dark water flows through tall trees, forming a dark, dense roof, dangerously inhabited by threatening noises. I entered among the cradles, and it was like treading water. I even thought I saw the cradle-canoes moving as I passed. Then I sawDr. Farías was up above. He was swinging from a rope tied to one of the ceiling beams. Everything suddenly lit up, and the present arrived with its cold nocturnal luminosity. No electric light came on, only the knowledge of the truth.

I grabbed a chair and climbed up next to Farías's body to support him, in case he was still alive. I had no doubt that this had just happened; it couldn't have been more than half a minute after the glass exploded. With one arm, I held his body against mine, trying to untie the rope with the other. I was sweating from the effort and helplessness, because if he had broken his neck, there was nothing else I could do.

When all his weight finally fell off, we both fell from the chair and ended up sideways on the floor. I checked for a pulse and breathing. I found nothing. I decided to try resuscitation and undid his shirt. When I began, I saw the opening in his abdomen, barely covered by a transparent, undoubtedly artificial membrane protecting his intestines. I watched, fascinated, as his insides moved like restless vipers, and I knew this was Farías's greatest stigma, something inherited and something he couldn't shake off.

The monster who needed to create other monsters.

He hadn't settled for my son. He had decided to plant in my memory something perhaps more lasting: remorse and anger.

But I only did what I could: lift him up a little, hug him, and kiss him on the cheek. I did what perhaps no one had ever done with him in their entire life.

And after holding him for a long time, I abandoned him to the river of death, surrounded by the cradles of the beings he had brought into being, in a long funeral procession that struck me as the most beautiful I would ever see.

4

Samanta didn't attend Farías's funeral. All of Buenos Aires's well-to-do society was at the Recoleta Cemetery to place the coffin in the family vault for two hundred years. There were two older brothers, their wives, and the doctor's nephews. There were no screams, of course, only suppressed sobs and a sadness that contrasted with the splendid sunshine of that day. I went unnoticed on that occasion; perhaps they had already grown accustomed to my face, the few who had perhaps recognized me the day before at the wake. There, I did see several government officials, and the faces of many people followed me as I walked slowly toward the body, which lay in state behind a closed casket. I stopped in front of it, made the sign of the cross and genuflected, and when I turned around, their neutral, dry, piercing expressions, like desert flies, watched me in complete silence, while I walked away, my gaze straight ahead and my thoughts filled with carrion. The same one I was still thinking about and smelling a week later as I read the book in my hands, sitting in the armchair in my library, at almost two in the morning on a Friday night. I had the lamp next to me, a glass of cognac that I was sipping very, very slowly, in gentle sips that matched each turn of the page. The urban smells were mingling with the wild, jungle aromas that Claudio Levi, the author, was developing in his research on anthropoids in the Congo. A fairly old book on comparative anthropology, but one that was a milestone in that science for having described for the first time a series of tribes that are now surely extinct at the hands of white man, or perhaps by their own degradation. The only thing that is certain is that they had not been found again, no matter how many explorers persisted in their pursuit. Gossip spoke of fiction, but Levi's book had been documented with photographs impossible to manipulate with the technology of the time, even with magnetic tape recordings that were corroborated by several experts.

The noise of the jungle at night, or perhaps at dusk, when the animals prepare to go hunting, while the sun sinks into the devouring abyss of the tall trees, which seem to trap it with their branches and vines, until they bury it in the swamps they conceal. The monkeys, however, prepare to sleep in their high branches, hidden in the dense foliage. They groom each other, then rest, occasionally squealing in fear or anger, perhaps also in

pleasure. But the animals Levi speaks of are a strange species of anthropoids. They have the typical appearance of apes, but their stature is somewhat larger, which is why they no longer live so much in trees. Instead, they have begun to walk more upright, searching for the elements with which they build tools, containers, and other things of indecipherable meaning.

Levi calls them class A1 anthropoids, to differentiate them from those he had seen before in the Amazon rainforest. The latter seem to have advanced further in their evolution. They have a typically ape-like appearance, distributiontion of abundant, thick hair, prognathism and elongated skulls, long upper limbs and shorter lower limbs. But the big difference is that they have begun to walk almost without the typical swaying of monkeys, and without placing their hands on the ground at any time. There are photographs in the book that document the footprints of their feet, and despite their almost nonexistent plantar arches, they could be mistaken for those of any modern human. In the appendix to this chapter, Levi develops something that he knew many would doubt, and so he presented it as a hypothesis that he hoped someone else would someday test. According to the natives of the Amazon, that is, the inhabitants of hidden villages, these monkeys arrived at those villages two or three times a year. They stopped at the entrance, looking toward the river where a flimsy dock welcomed and dismissed canoes or small boats. They came in threes, armed only with a few branches that they sometimes used as walking sticks. The villagers said, according to Levi, that their elders had told them that these monkeys had been doing the same thing for many decades before, but the curious thing is that they didn't describe them as monkeys, but rather as members of neighboring tribes who came to see them, perhaps out of curiosity. One of the stories recorded in the book is that of an old woman over ninety years old. She said she had seen these visits with her own eyes several times over the years. When she was a child, she had been forbidden to approach them, but when she was much older, even a grandmother, she said she had seen the monkeys with the same appearance Levi describes. The three traditional visitors tried to observe the traffic on the dock or the waters of the river; at first they were dark, naked men, perhaps with harmless spears, and then apes of the same height and position, but despite their nakedness, covered in hair and with slightly altered faces. Levi goes further in his speculations. He talks about having conducted the identikit experiment using the woman's description of the former visitors. Of course, Levi was an artist, and he himself made the portraits of the original trio, so there's no scientific basis for believing in the veracity of such facts. He then claims to have seen photographs of the monkeys that continued to visit the village. And with both graphic records, he performed a kind of interpolation: he traced the figures from the photograph and superimposed them on the identikit. The similarity, of course, was uncanny, but it resulted, and Levi knew it, from an innocent ingenuity. For that reason, the artist's naiveté, and the fact that he didn't present it as a document, spared him many accusations of fraud, but not the eternal jokes in the scientific community.

I looked up, suddenly startled by the click of a door lock. It wasn't thundering or raining, just the dazzling silence, but I still remembered Jacobs's legendary tale, where a wish granted by a monkey's paw talisman brought horror into a quiet English house. I had heard the click, but I didn't get up to find out what it was. It wasn't until the next day that I wondered if I had sensed the cause all along, or even if I knew it for sure. But that night it hadn't yet dawned on me, and I continued reading. My son's ape-like hand turned the pages of the book, plunging me deeper and deeper into the thicket of treacherous vegetation, filled with vermin and poison. And that hand literally accompanied me in the sleep that slowly led me toward the nocturnal jungle, the moon hidden by storm clouds, he and I covered by the branches, our arms close together, in a kind of aroma of extreme humidity and serene warmth. In the morning, I woke up with my book open on the floor, the page where I'd left off already lost. I rubbed my face in the daylight streaming through the curtain. I turned off the lamp and got up to make myself some breakfast. It was Saturday, and although I didn't work, Samanta usually worked almost all day since our whole drama began. I smiled at this thought: now that the main thing was over, or at least that's what I thought, calling it all a drama was an irony I could indulge in.

I made coffee, made toast, and looked for the jam Homer's nurse had given us. She spent the weekends at her parents' country house in San Vicente, and from time to time she brought jars of preserved fruit or sweets. I spread one of the toasts with butter and plum jam. I looked out the window at the heavy rain and thought of Homer, who might have done the same thing in the big house, and I would have liked to have him with me in my kitchen, offering him some of that toast.

I would call Samantha; she was probably already awake and working in her office. I knocked on the door. She didn't answer. I walked in and saw that the desk was untouched. , the computer off, and the folders of her recent cases stacked to one side. I wondered if maybe she was feeling ill; it was strange that she hadn't gotten up. I went to our bedroom and found the bed made. It hadn't been used all night. I saw some wrinkles on the sheet on the side where she slept: she must have been lying there, fully clothed, until sometime during the night. I went to the closets and knew what I would find: almost all of her clothes were gone. There were many shoes and a large number of other things she rarely used. I stood there, my heart beating rapidly. An alchemy of anguish and despair formed a lump in my throat, but I didn't cry. That would have been a great stupidity on my part, because all the anger I'd felt recently, all the violent arguments we'd had since Farías's death, which had led me to not sleep in our bed since then, no longer constituted anger, but a resignation bordering on the saddest indifference.

Samanta had left home, without even leaving a note about when she would collect the rest of her personal and work belongings. I didn't expect her to return, because I had made sure that the exact impression of Farías hanging from a rope would remain imprinted on her memory. I waited, waiting night after night in my library as if it were the refuge of a hunter watching for the arrival of his prey. And that click of the front door lock

was the signal I didn't interpret at the time because I was too tired, but which I knew nonetheless.

Was my son's ape-like hand a sign, a token, a talisman, perhaps? All of that, perhaps, and also the turning point of an ancient tragedy.

The nurse's name was Lucia. Since we had first seen her silently carrying our son away during that interview with Dr. Moreau, her attitude toward me had changed substantially. It was almost certainly her habit until she gained confidence in the parents of the children she cared for, testing how far she could go in their cooperation in caring for their children. She was the only one I had complete confidence in regarding Homer's needs, and such certainty in her ability and loyalty, if I can call it that, developed slowly, from the complete silence and averted glances of my initial visits.

I remember the first time she spoke to me directly:

"How is your wife?" she asked.

"Fine, thank you very much..." What I thought about continuing wasn't necessary. I knew, and so did Lucia, because she left the child with me in the playroom and left, turning only once before disappearing through the door, giving me a smile that wasn't given directly to me, but with her eyes on the child.

I don't know why I was so sure that was the case, even at that moment when nothing predisposed me to trust her. Her coldness, even the bitter bad temper she had displayed the first time, told me that nothing would go well while she was in charge of my son.

As the months went by, all that changed. Her conversations became more frequent and pleasant, even the smiles she rarely deigned to give me were more about my relationship with Homer than about me in particular. There was something about her that made me want to search, as if with that smile in her shining eyes I could find approval, a relief for my always anguished soul.

Everything was falling apart in my marriage, and Homer's drama, which at first I thought was just another cause of grief, was becoming the element of a Greek tragedy. I mean that not everything in those dramas represents a misfortune in itself, nor does that circumstance end there, but they play the role of protagonists. They are, I believe, turning points in the personal history of the true protagonists. I felt like a supporting character to a stronger and more unbreakable character, who was the main plot of the story I was involved in.

One day, shortly before the sentencing, she came into the playroom. I was talking to the father of the boy with prognathism. We usually met on visiting days, even though our schedules didn't exactly match. We got used to arriving early or staying after our usual hours, or sometimes we walked out of the house together to our cars. I'll talk about him later. Now I want to mention that when Lucía saw us talking on the big sofa, with each of our children in our arms, she stood in front of us and took a picture.

We were both surprised; it was certainly unexpected. We even thought it was forbidden.

"I'm sorry if I scared you." I love seeing you so much that I couldn't resist.

"I'm sorry if I scared you." My friend, because that's what I considered him to be during the five years that we met, looked at me with a knowing expression. It was the first time he had offered me his bail like that. She winked at me slightly, so she wouldn't notice, and still holding her grown son, she gestured for me not to be afraid of moving forward with her. I couldn't help but laugh as Lucía put her camera in her uniform pocket and walked over to grab Homero. It was time to leave.

"What are you going to do with that photo?" I asked her.

"Just save it." She looked at me seriously, then, and I guessed she thought she had done something wrong. Maybe no one had asked her that question, and for a moment she thought I was doing something wrong.

"It's not forbidden, if that's what you think. Dr. Moreau usually takes photos for the institution's records, and also for the medical journals in which she publishes many articles."

"I didn't mean to offend her, I just got curious, a pleasant curiosity, I mean."

I knew I was getting into trouble, and my friend smiled, trying to hide his face with his hand. We left together and laughed about the situation as we returned in my car; his car was being repaired for a few days.

"And why do you think I'm interested in that nurse?" I asked him as I walked through the streets of the neighborhood where he lived.

"Because she's a cute girl, Leandro. And because I'd take advantage of it if I could."

"And why can't you?" It was a question with no double meaning, but I regretted it before I finished asking it.

"My wife has been bedridden with quadriplegia since pregnancy. She's endured everything, and she knows and hears everything. I tell her every detail of my visits when I return, and then she falls asleep peacefully."

Samanta became palpable in my memory as I drove. I felt her body in my hands, the lucidity of her intelligence as it burst forth with her beautiful voice and her expressive eyes, always so lucid. And the sadness in his gaze, which gradually turned into coldness and bitterness, took on the tones of resentment and failure. Everything settled in the air inside the car, and he felt that something like this was brewing. So, when we arrived at his house and he saw that I was about to drive on, he warned me, and as we stopped, he said:

"I'm not coming back tomorrow. You'll have to manage on your own." And as he got out, he smiled at me in a different way again, and it was like I was getting to know him little by little. Then it wasn't difficult for me to feel

guilty about wallowing in sadness and self-pity. Samanta was slowly disappearing, of her own free will, and other things and other beings slowly came to the forefront.

My son was already three years old when the relationship between Lucía and me became so stable that we often seriously considered living together. But there were several things that weren't making up our minds: doubts and fears, silly and circumstantial, that shouldn't have prevented love, if it was what it was all about. I don't know what to call it, but the truth was that in her I found a kind of security mixed with an ecstasy that for the first time I had no qualms about calling happiness. She was the perfect mother for Homer, both professionally and personally, because when she came to our house and stayed overnight, she treated Homer differently than she did at the Institution. Dr. Moreau had given me permission to bring him home on weekends. On those days, the house had always been filled with relatives and family members, turning the place into something very different from a resting place. Lucía and I argued several times about this. Given that it was a place dedicated to children, it was normal for there to be some noise from time to time. But after three years, I'd grown accustomed to the irreparable silence of the sick kids, and the artificial noise of the weekends, that bustle of coming and going through the hallways, of cars entering and exiting through the gate, wasn't natural, and suddenly it felt unnerving to visit Homer on the weekends.

"The kids don't seem to grow up, they're like slow, lazy people..."

Lucía stared at the ceiling above our bed, and I knew what she was thinking: about the dead who appeared one morning in their big-boy cribs, as silent as before, and even more still, surrounded by something akin to bliss.

That same morning, I remember it well, a Monday when we got up very early because the three of us had to leave for the big house in separate cars, since we didn't want anyone to find out about our relationship—(fears, always fears that we'd be separated)—I found Homer sitting on the floor leafing through a book from my library. I went over to take him to the bedroom and dress him because we were running late. I didn't notice the fact of what had happened: the reality that he had gotten out of bed—he was already four years old—and, walking toward the library, had climbed onto a chair to reach the books on the lower shelves.

I picked him up, and his left hand, that ape-like hand that was nowA primate's arm, stretching up to his shoulder and upper chest, he didn't let go of the book. I stared at him, aware of a certain sense of foreboding. Something told me to stop and leave Homer on the floor for a moment longer. As I did, I saw the cover of the book: it was Kant and his Critique of Pure Reason. Homer didn't cry or complain when I tried to separate him from the book. His voice, then dry and sour, with monosyllables we hadn't been able to get out of him since he'd begun to talk, said to me:

"Dad..."

"Yes, Homer, what's wrong?"

Then he pointed with a hairy finger to a page containing Kant's categories of nothingness. My son, in a childish voice, somewhat deep, as always, but which had become smoother since then, read along with the tip of his finger on the paper, following the sentence to the end.

"Empty object of a concept."

His finger paused, and he looked at me questioningly, with a look of intelligence I hadn't seen in all my years of teaching. And that's why it was so clear, because it came not from the face of my son, but from the face of a being I long hoped wasn't, a kind of primitive, bestial ape that I also wished was sterile, to end the degeneration toward which humanity was advancing.

I had raised this theory with Victor, my only friend from my visits to the mansion, as much as with Lucía. He understood me when I gave him Levi's book to read. But Lucía didn't want to know anything about those theories. She lived in the immediate present, struggling with everyday life, and wasn't interested in the past or the future, or in the theories of evolution or human knowledge.

When I heard her call from the room, urging me to leave, I got up and went to the bedroom.

"I want you to come see something, please."

Lucía looked at me with annoyance, already dressed, standing next to the bed, and for a moment the image of Samanta crossed my mind, in the same position and with the same expression. She relented, in her exalted silence that I was beginning to love, and went with me to the library. Homer continued reading on the floor, now aloud. He sometimes stumbled over long words or convoluted, repetitive phrases, or Latin quotations. But he ignored them, conquered them with parsimony, and Kant's dense conceptual and grammatical architecture gradually assembled until it outlined ideas like cathedrals inside and outside our minds. What he read, Lucía and I listened to, no longer with astonishment, but with admiration.

She approached Homer after listening to him for almost ten minutes, reading and turning the pages of those complex theories. She sat beside him and comforted him when he began to cry. I hadn't noticed, so I tried to figure out what was happening. She gave me a look of reproach, but also one of such pride that I felt a kind of lump in my throat. Pride not for her, but for the one she was hugging.

"Dad..." we heard him say, his mouth against Lucía's white jacket. She wiped his face, that face that was no longer definitively human but had, before our now clear vision, taken on the very slowly progressive shape of a primate's skull.

"What am I?" she asked me, and her voice was both a reproach and a plea. And the pain of both words was so strong that I can only curse the sum of all human knowledge, like the bestial idea of a God who creates remorse and cruelty.

I needn't explain that we arrived late that morning, and Dr. Moreau obviously realized everything. She dismissed Lucía, but she couldn't afford to ask me to take Homer to another school; I was too reliable a client for her finances. There were no scenes of anguish or recriminations. I was the only one who seemed indignant—childishly indignant, I must say—demanding Lucía's reinstatement. But she was the first to try to calm me down when Dr. Moreau gathered us in her office. I made her sit down and, addressing the director, said:

"Let's talk bluntly, Doctor. We know what's best for you, but if you fire Lucía, I'll take my son somewhere else."

Dr. Moreau looked at me condescendingly, but she wasn't the least bit afraid. She made a face as if to say, "Men, what children you are," and exchanged glances with Lucía with a complicity that went beyond their antagonism.

Lucía placed her hand on my arm and spoke to me compassionately.

"Don't worry about me. Homer is and should always be your only concern. Never forget that, dear. The rest of us don't matter..."

She stood up and left the office. The director and I remained silent, avoiding each other's gaze. Lucía came back changed and carrying a bag containing the things she had in her wardrobe. We left together to take her home. During the car ride, I got the courage to ask her to move in with me.

Lucía, without taking her eyes off theShe smiled almost imperceptibly. I was sure she'd say yes. She was the ideal mother for Homer, and the best companion for my life.

"I don't work as a home health nurse, Professor."

And because she knew he'd hurt me, even though she had to, she ran her hand through my hair while I was driving. Thus, the silence became complicit in a farewell that wasn't final at the time, but that played the role of conclusion and end to something that happened more in the recesses of my mind than in reality.

During the fifth and final year of Homer's hospitalization at the mansion, I insisted that Dr. Moreau designate a special teacher for Homer.

"You've seen the intelligence tests we gave my son these past few months, and the high IQ the results showed."

"I've already analyzed them, Professor, but you can consult my files yourself. Almost fifty percent of the history of our boarding schools has the same IQs." These are virtual abilities, so-called, that cannot be developed not only because of physical impairments, but also because of other neurological and even psychological factors.

"But doctor, if you listen to Homer speak, without looking at him, you can see his absolute normality; I mean his abilities as a child and as a human

being. He plays, jumps, reasons, cries, and feels like any other normal child. It's only his appearance that disturbs us..."

"Perhaps you, Professor, I have seen many major phenomena in my professional life."

Then I remembered the conversation I had with my son that same afternoon, before the talk with the principal.

"Today we were talking with Homer about philosophy, about Kant specifically; it's amazing how he is fascinated." I observed the doctor's reaction; she didn't flinch.

"As I was saying, we were talking about humankind in general, and how humankind perceives itself as a phenomenon in the world." The only way is this: phenomenon or noumenon as a noun, not an adjective.

From that day on, I was the one who dedicated myself to educating Homer during every visit or during his departure permits. Many times I thought I was saturating him with ideas or knowledge, but I was actually learning more than he was, because his intellectual prowess was developing in inverse proportion to his physical capacity. On Sundays, we went to the coast on a three-hour trip along roads that crossed fields of cattle, or crops with windmills, and then the dunes that took us directly to the sea. I watched him sitting in the seat next to me, enraptured by the landscape, but I noticed the difficulty in leaning out the window with his somewhat clumsy hand. His right hand still remained unharmed, but the hair on his body was growing longer, and his legs began, not yet to deform, but to assume vicious positions that were beyond his control. It wasn't summer yet, but the sun was warm, so we stopped at a hotel in San Clemente, changed clothes, and went down to the beach.

He liked to run, but in recent months, keeping his back straight had been very painful. I sat on the sand and watched him struggle to stay upright while running, but he was already struggling even while walking. The doctor at the mansion had said it was to be expected, but when he talked about joint degeneration and aging, I knew the doctor had no idea what he was talking about. He was a general practitioner rather than a specialist, and I knew that each of the children hospitalized had a different pathology; Dr. Moreau would have included them all in the neurological category.

If Homer's illness was causing him to progressively become like an ape, could it perhaps be that his body was acquiring other abilities that were partly incompatible with what we expected of him and with his own intellectual development? Maybe his joints were stiffer, and his muscles stronger, but for certain circumstances and situations, not by today's standards. Why, then, this astonishing intelligence for a five-year-old, this almost abysmal lucidity, and this interest in subjects and ideas that bordered on the incomprehensible? It made more sense that the degradation was both physical and mental, as was the case with my friend's son.

I called him back to my side and stop straining. He returned with sweat all over his body, with sand sticking to his increasingly hairy skin. Then we lay

down, and I stroked his head. He fell asleep with the sound of the sea transmitted through the sand to his ear, which was resting against the floor.

One of those weekends, when we returned, I left Homer in his room. I was surprised that Victor wasn't in the playroom with his son. I asked the nurses, but they couldn't answer. On Wednesday I ran into him at the door of theDirector. His face was literally overwhelmed with grief and defeat.

Asking him what was wrong seemed stupid and cruel, but stupid words are often necessary too. We sat on a step by the front door, while some nurses wheeled children in wheelchairs toward the park.

"He died on Sunday," he told me. "It seems he choked on something and couldn't spit it out. It was at night, maybe on his own saliva, that's why I always cleaned him up so often, do you remember?"

"I'm sure I'll remember," I said, and hugging him felt trivial, and I didn't know if it would upset him. He wasn't crying, and he looked at me.

"We buried him this morning. I didn't want anyone to come, do you understand?"

I nodded and offered to take him home. He had come by taxi from the cemetery to sort out the pending paperwork with the mansion. I know he'd been having trouble paying for his hospitalization lately, and I don't know how he managed to pay for his hospitalization and, at the same time, for his wife's care. I was going to offer to help him, but since I knew how offensive it might be to him, I decided to find out later on my own.

We arrived at his front door. I stopped the engine and told him I'd stay with him, if he'd let me.

"No," he said. "My wife doesn't know yet. I have to tell her today, and I don't know how." He was staring out the windshield, and suddenly he looked at me and smiled with his lips closed, as if he'd had the best idea in the history of the world.

"Maybe I won't tell her... the photos are the same, always. If he asks for videos, I'll edit them with the camera."

Now his smile became open and clear, his expression brightening.

"Both of them are going to be alive, Leandro, do you realize?"

How could I convey the aridity of that fallacy, if for him it was a sweet nectar that soothed his life? How could I convey the dissatisfaction of that lie, if for him it was the most complete satisfaction because it filled his life? How could I convince him that pain has no postponements, because pain doesn't die, it only dulls, if with what I was about to do, the postponed pain would return in full force when he no longer cared to confront or suffer it.

A few days later, I walked into Dr. Moreau's office.

"What can I do for you, Professor?" she asked sarcastically; I already knew I'd tired her out with my complaints.

"I'd like to know if I can help my friend Víctor Molina in any way, financially, if he's behind on his payments..."

"That's very kind of you, Professor, and yes... Mr. Molina may be quite behind on his payments, but those matters have already been resolved in the meetings we've had this week..."

I waited for an explanation, the manner in which they had been resolved. It wasn't any of my business; she didn't need to tell me that in words.

"That's very kind of you, Professor. Good morning." She went back to her papers, and I left uneasily. I didn't trust her, but it reassured me that my friend no longer had that burden on his shoulders.

It was on Friday of that same week when I went to pick up Homer to take him home. I usually went to pick him up during visiting hours, but that day I had to teach a special class in the faculty auditorium. The students delayed me with their questions, and I couldn't refuse because we rarely had the opportunity for that personal exchange. I arrived at almost 8:00 p.m., and it was getting dark on that November day. I parked the car after passing through the gate, and as I got out, I ran into two or three men carrying bags, whom I assumed were garbage collectors. There was a large pickup truck on the side of the road, toward which they were walking. They left the bags in the truck and, without closing the door, returned to the morgue storage room and took out a stretcher with a body.

I stood on the steps of the main entrance, watching. They put the body in the truck, returned the stretcher to the morgue, and drove off, turning around and passing in front of the entrance. It was getting dark, and the shadow of the eaves was hit by the pickup truck, but I could clearly read the sign on the side of the license plate. It wasn't a vehicle from the municipal morgue or a funeral home, but from a genetic research institute that Dr. Farías had mentioned to me five years earlier. We had received the lab results confirming Homer's illness, and that was the extent of our relationship with the place.

I went in to look for him and ran into the night watchman. We barely knew each other, but he treated me with respectful courtesy based on what he'd heard about us.

"Weren't those from the Genetics Institute?" I asked as I led Homer by the hand down the stairs, and it was already nighttime. The watchman was wearing his usual uniform, the moonlight reflecting off the metal of his cap.

"Yes, Prof." They come around from time to time to look for bodies to study, you know...

"I imagine, but who died...?"

"Molina's son, they just took him."

That same night I stopped by Víctor's house. I told Homero to wait for me in the car. I got out and rang the doorbell. I heard footsteps and the hall light coming on. Víctor opened the door, barefoot and wearing an open robe. He wasn't surprised to see me. He'd never invited me in before, but

this time he did. It was an old, one-story house in the oldest part of the Saavedra neighborhood. A house that might once have been upper-middle-class, but was already in ruins, the ceilings and walls damp and the paint peeling.

Víctor led me to the spacious kitchen, with a large table in the center of a semicircle of half-abandoned countertops and cupboards. The smell of damp was intense, and he had the scent of wine on his breath. Several empty bottles were next to a cupboard.

"What would you like to drink?"

"Nothing, thank you."

He sat down on a rickety chair, naked under his robe. When he realized, he laughed and tied his belt.

"I was just going to make love to my wife," he said, explaining that it was like making love to a dead woman. "She doesn't feel anything, she just likes being useful to me, and to me... well... she's useful to me insofar as she's useful to all men in a certain way, right?"

"Mmm..." I replied.

"You certainly don't have any problems with that nurse. I know you still see each other from time to time..."

Victor was so drunk that he wasn't the same man I had known, and I told myself that maybe this was the real him, the one not overcome by sadness and misfortune. Sarcastic, cruel.

"What did you come to ask me?"

"Nothing," I stood up to leave. He stood up and held me by the arm.

"Now that you know my house and me, and since you don't seem to like it at all, you're going to tell me what you think."

"You didn't bury the boy..."

He looked at me with contempt. He took a bottle from a cupboard, uncorked it, and poured two glasses.

"Sit down and take at least a sip."

I did as he said, and while he did, he said:

"I sold it... the doctor said the Genetics Institute looks for bodies with rare diseases, so if I wanted to pay off my debt, I could also contribute to science..."

He let out a shrill but short laugh. His body continued to shake with tremors of suppressed laughter for a while. His back was leaning against the backrest, one arm extended on the table with the glass in his hand, his legs stretched out under the table.

"I'll be back tomorrow," I said. "Homer is in the car."

Suddenly he became serious and stood up to walk me to the door, but as we passed his wife's room, he stopped.

"You know where?"

He came in without closing the door, took off his robe, and lay down next to her, a motionless body in a white nightgown with brown hair. I thought I saw eyes blinking, staring at me for a few seconds. Then I turned and left the house. I saw Homer behind the closed window, writing with his ape-like hand on the fogged-up glass. I passed in front of the car, and when he saw me, he stopped, as if embarrassed. I got in and smiled at him, trying to decipher the letters on the windshield. The sentence wasn't finished, so I told him to continue. He then extended his hand and finished the last word.

"Freedom is just an idea of reason."

I remained for a moment, lost in contemplation of my son, then glanced one last time at the door of the house I had just left. Homer was five years old, and I saw in his eyes that he knew everything that had happened, simply by virtue of his dazzling intelligence, by the sole and incontrovertible fact of observing my gaze as we left that house.

Who was this boy in the seat next to me? I wondered. He was my son, yes, but he was also my father, my teacher, and a vulnerable creature who could easily be discarded by any fool who met him along the way. But above all, I believed he wasn't me, and yet an instant later I knew he was my conscience, and something deeper and broader still: perhaps the entire past versus the abhorrent future looming over the world. He carried the hidden idea of a future, and I felt the full weight of the responsibility to care for and protect him on my shoulders. I, a bodyguard in love with his protégé, laughed at the idea. Then Homer, seeing me laugh, came over and rested his head on my leg. He fell asleep. I started driving, and we went home.

5

That week, I took my son out of Dr. Moreau's institution. I gave her no explanation. She was stunned; I'd never seen her so surprised. I knew it would disrupt the institute's finances for a while to continue without the extremely high contributions I made each month. Since we won the lawsuit, the fees had been raised exclusively for my family. Samanta knew this, but it was a price to pay in return for the greater benefits we had already obtained.

The doctor told me to think it over carefully, that there was no other place in the entire country that would better care for children like Homero. I could have answered that it was probably so, but the mere thought of Víctor selling his son's body to pay the months of debt led me to complete silence, absolute indifference. Someone once told me, while we were arguing, that they hated being ignored. Silence is perhaps the best response to certain pettiness.

I simply replied that I was thinking of leaving the country; I had been offered positions teaching Spanish abroad. I read in her eyes that she was mulling over many ideas, which she discarded with disappointment and helplessness. There was nothing legal she could keep me with, and she knew I had more money than any political influence she could wield. I signed the check for the last month, she handed me the receipt, and bid me a bitter farewell. She hesitated to shake my hand in farewell, finally extending it. Then I did what I did without planning it, simply in an act of such passion and childish whim that I would have been ashamed for my own son to see it. But the only person who could have judged me was the person in front of me, the person to whom this act of redress, to call it somewhat honorable, was directed.

I looked her in the eyes, making sure she understood, without words that could be recorded, the true reason for my definitive departure. And then I took two bills from my pocket, choosing them like someone leaving a tip on a restaurant table, and placed them in the hand she offered me. She stared at those few pesos, and must have continued to do so even after I turned around and left the room. I crossed the halls and the large central hall for the last time, remembering when Samanta and I entered with Homer in my arms. Back then, it was very quiet, as if the stage had been set for us. Now, there were the cries of children who could only utter moans or inarticulate voices. Ancestral cries, I thought. Some of those children could survive, I told myself, without all the trappings of that mansion, simply chasing weak beings like Dr. Moreau, as if they were prey.

For almost six months, I had my son at home. I looked for places that were recommended to me both in Buenos Aires and in the provinces. Lucía came to take care of him on those trips I needed to make to personally visit these so-called institutions. When I returned, she and I would talk, exchanging opinions. I had gotten a nursing position in a nursing home in Buenos Aires.

"They say children and old people are alike," I told her. With that simplicity, I was trying to avoid the main topic: our intermittent relationships. She laughed.

"Not at all. They're very different, in every way. It's been a total effort for me to relearn a million things."

I had long since given up trying to convince her to stay with me. The more she visited, the more I missed her, and suddenly I thought it was a feeling very similar to love. Lucía didn't know what she felt, and the only time I thought she'd tell me, the phone rang. She watched me while I spoke to Samanta. She'd been working in Rosario since she'd left home, and from time to time we talked about the bank account where Homero's money was deposited.

Lucía watched me while I argued with Samanta about taking our son out of the mansion. I explained the real reasons; she seemed angry, but I didn't bother trying to convince her. After a while, she sounded indifferent. She didn't ask to speak to Homero. Then he came out of his room and climbed onto the sofa, kneeling down and resting his hands on the back. Lucía held

him back for fear he'd fall when she saw him climb onto the edge and stand on all fours.

"Wait a minute," I said to Samanta, ready to challenge him, but he asked me if it was his mother on the phone, and stretched out his ape-like arm to grab the device. He held it to his ear and seemed to wait.

"Leandro, are you there?" came from the other end.

Instead of speaking, Homer emitted a monotonous, bestial sound, a kind of growl I'd never heard from him before. His eyes, however, dazzled with intelligence and malice.

"Apparently," I immediately thought.

"The strategy of masks to unmask fools."

Samanta hung up. The click sounded just like on old landline phones, as if the present had camouflaged itself with the sounds and aspects of the past, giving it a melancholy flavor that softened the impact of the death of futile hopes.

Homer handed the phone back to me without looking at me. Lucía had the wise discretion not to say anything. Nothing, not even an attempt to comfort him. He sat on the couch like a civilized man now, turned on the television with the remote control, turned it off immediately, and then walked slowly and limping toward the library, his back twisted, as he always did when he tried to walk like a human.

From then on, Lucía told me that he had to be taken to a center specializing in physical rehabilitation. I already knew this, of course, but I was so focused on encouraging his intelligence that I couldn't convince him to abandon that aspect, even partially.

"But it's necessary," she said. "In just a few years, he won't be able to walk anymore."

I replied that she herself had seen him climb stairs faster than us, and climb sharp edges and places while maintaining his balance.

"We're in the city, Leandro, not the jungle. Or do you want to leave him with his supposed peers...?"

"We'll manage on our own," I said, and went into the kitchen.

She came up to me and hugged me from behind, putting her arms across my chest and resting her head on my back.

"I apologize..."

Five minutes later, she was gone. She picked up her purse and coat, covering her nurse's uniform because she was going to work that night.

"I'll come back tomorrow. Maybe I'll have some news. There's an old man in La Plata who knows a lot about these things."

I was too angry and unwilling to give in. Samanta's call had enraged me, and I know it had Lucía too, of course.

The next day, she didn't come home, but she called me an hour before she started work. She asked me to visit her that night at the nursing home. She mentioned the old man she thought could help us.

"Ring the bell and wait for me while I open the door. Visitors aren't supposed to be allowed at that time, but the old man already knows you. I told him about you two when he found out I'd worked at the mansion." He knows Dr. Moreau…" And he interrupted very suggestively.

I told him I'd be there, but I didn't have anyone to leave Homero with.

"Bring him. He wants to meet him. If the doctors ask, I'll pass them off as a nephew and grandson who've come for some urgent, unexpected matter."

At eleven at night, I arrived at the nursing home at 400 Perón Street. On one side of the door, the oval plaque with black letters on a white background bearing the old name of Cangallo Street was still hanging. It was an old house with balconies full of flowerpots and carved railings. Mold was growing on the walls, spreading over the sculptures that supported the alabaster windows and forming, above everything else, a small turret with an old, long-dead clock above the third floor. It had stopped working at six, one afternoon or morning in who knows what year. I remembered an old Piazzolla song, accompanied by the rhythmic sound of cars and garbage trucks, stopping and starting with shouts and honking horns.

Lucía opened the door and greeted me with a kiss on the lips. She glanced back down the long, dimly lit hallway before doing so. Homero was holding my hand, scared.

"It looks like a cheap dive," I said, and she laughed.

It was an old place, for poor old people who left their entire pension there every month. Lucía had told me they signed a power of attorney so the owner could collect from them. Most of them were nearly disabled, with no known relatives. Many were senile, and she knew the owner made up signatures. He was quite an artist at it. His name was Gonçalvez, and the family owned a garbage collection company. I remembered the truck that had stopped almost at the door a little while earlier, lifting the bundles of black bags more slowly and carefully.

He led me down the hallway to where it ended, and we came out into an overgrown garden with a couple of tall trees barely surviving. There were flowerbeds with geraniums, hollyhocks, and city-standard shrubs. There was a tidy room in what must have been some kind of workshop or warehouse, or perhaps a machine room. Now darkness dominated the damp atmosphere.

Lucía turned around when we entered, sensing my doubts.

"He's a privileged old man in this place; he has his life savings, and with that, he stays here, anonymous and peaceful."

I didn't think it was necessary to ask more, and Lucía called out to him in the darkness.

"Mr. Valverde, are you awake?"

No one answered.

"Gustavo, can we come in? I brought my friend, the one I told you about." He's with the boy...

Then the light came on, a nightstand on a small marble table next to a green corduroy armchair with slashed arms. The old man still had all his hair, his face was still round and, of course, deeply wrinkled, his hands were long and weathered, callused, and smelled of something sour and strong. That was the main thing that caught my attention.

"Good evening, Professor. The young lady told me about you, and I think I can help you with your problem." a.- He looked at Homer and smiled.- But I don't think it's really a problem. I could only offer him alternatives and guide him. The unusual is not usually welcome, I understand that well.

Lucía brought two chairs over and we sat down. I placed Homer on my knees, while the old man stroked my son's ape-like arm.

"It's surprising how gently nature has treated your son, Professor. It has given him a progressive and harmonious change. Haven't you noticed the child's beauty?"

A lump formed in my throat. I didn't know what to say. Lucía came to my aid, getting up and going in search of something hidden under the armchair. A white dog appeared, actually short-haired, earless, robust but already old. Its gaze was blind, its eyes clouded by cataracts, I thought. She told Homer to pet it. He got off my knees and came closer. Bending down, he first extended his normal hand, but the dog raised its head, sniffing, and growled. Then he did the same with the ape's hand, and the animal, after sniffing it, allowed himself to be petted.

"His name is Peractio," the old man said. I wondered what kind of name that was for a dog, when I realized it was Latin.

"You have an idea why he gets his name, don't you?"

"I suppose it's Latin. Do you mean last?"

"Exactly, and more poetically, I would call it 'the ending.' It's a feminine adjective, and as you see, she is the last of my pets. She hasn't had any offspring, and therefore is the last of her only kind."

Lucía followed the conversation, but she tried to distract Homer by petting the dog, telling him about its characteristics in a low voice.

The light from the nightstand illuminated the room very poorly. It seemed much larger, but beyond the bed I assumed was next to one of the four walls, a table, and chairs, it might have been empty. A feeling of material and absent things prevailed, but above all the sour smell.

"It's formaldehyde, Professor. It lingers in my hands even though I haven't used it for years."

"Are you a doctor?"

"A pharmacist, actually. I moved to Buenos Aires when I retired twenty-five years ago. This whole house was mine, but the Gonçalvezes went out of their way to buy me the place. I was already tired, too tired. I've struggled since the days I lived in my village with my mother. If it weren't for my children, who have always protected me... That's why, when Peractio dies, I will disappear too. I haven't been able to overcome the decrepitude of the world."

When he said this, he tried with difficulty to move his back from the chair and stretch an arm toward Homer. I learned later that I had misinterpreted his gesture. I thought he was talking about my son as a sign of regression, and in reality, it was I who still believed that to be true, and yet I hated that anyone else would mention it or even openly consider it so.

I grabbed Homer by his ape-like arm and brought him closer to me again. He was surprised to find himself separated from the dog, and Lucía looked at me questioningly.

"I don't understand why you wanted to meet us, and how you could help us..."

"Don't be angry, Professor. It's not what you think. I don't want to destroy the boy; he's not decrepitude, but a step I didn't think of when I was very young. Nature always finds its way along unexpected paths. Your son's mind is privileged, Lucía already told me about him, but his body is transforming. He needs special care so that his mind doesn't have to worry about the body. That's what I've tried to do all my life. The body is slavery, and freedom is only an idea of reason." "In it," he said, placing the index finger of his right hand on his head, "lies true freedom."

I remembered what Homer had written on the car windshield a while back.

"Well, I'm a little tired and want to go to sleep. But before Miss Lucía helps me change and go to bed, I'll give you the details of who you should see for the next few years of your son's education."

He opened the small drawer in the nightstand beside him and rummaged through the papers.

"Let me help you," Lucía said.

"Don't meddle with my things," he replied, shaking his hands. He continued rummaging until he pulled out a piece of paper, examined it in the light from the nightstand, squinting, and handed it to me.

"The principal is an acquaintance of mine, actually the son of an acquaintance. His name is Bernardo Ruiz III. I know it sounds pompous, and he is something of a man, with pretensions of forming some kind of private kingdom, with all the corresponding trappings." But these are

merely aristocratic ideas, which luckily translate only into great discretion and a neat and impressive education.

"And where is this clinic?"

"In Montevideo, but it's not a clinic..."

"Institute, then..."

"Nor. Contrary to his usual nature, he named it Home. He has plenty of money thanks to his mother's family. Father, so you shouldn't worry about finding another Dr. Moreau in him. He's absolutely trustworthy for your son's needs, but you'll have to get used to his eccentricities.

As she finished speaking, her eyes began to close. Lucía told me to wait for her by the door. I saw her help him get up and go beyond the light. A dim lamp came on in the ceiling, illuminating the bed on which he sat. She changed him slowly, with enormous patience. The old man's body, almost naked, was nothing more than bone and skin, but he moved without pain, albeit slowly. He seemed to be the embodiment of patience, as the dog lay down at his feet. Lucía turned off both lights, and we left in silence.

"Would you like something to eat in the kitchen? I've finished the hard work for tonight; the rest will be quiet if there's no news. Everyone wakes up very early, but by then I'll be off guard."

Homer was sleepy, and I told him we were going home.

"Well, we'll talk tomorrow." He kissed me goodbye at the door, and I saw an old woman in a nightgown who had peeked out of one of the rooms hiding.

"Tomorrow he's going to gossip to his boss," I said.

She made a show of dismissing it.

"I have more important gossip to share. If he gets annoying... don't get upset, dear." And she closed the door.

We stood on the sidewalk in complete silence. The traffic light on the corner was changing its lights to indicate no traffic. The tall buildings on both sides hid the sky, which looked cloudy due to the excessive dew that had begun to form. I looked at my watch; it was almost two in the morning.

"Did you like the dog?" I asked Homer when I saw him turn his gaze toward the door as we walked away.

"Yes, Dad." He's a very cute dog. But he's sad because he's going to die.

We got in the car, and I asked him how he knew. He shrugged.

"I'm sleepy, let's go home."

I started the car and drove through the almost deserted streets of downtown. Pueyrredón Avenue, then Jujuy Avenue, we passed under the now obsolete highway that was built more than seventy years ago. I wished that night would never end, that time would be eternal in that car where my son and I were riding in the most peaceful silence ever conceived. The streetlights, dim, flickering, submissive and obedient to the will of sleep and wakefulness. The few cars, the buildings as if dead, the sidewalks covered with memories, and the humidity that melted everything into a state of absolute coherence. God was no longer needed, and the idea of time was strange and cruel. Only the space forming the architecture of the streets and buildings, the framework of a reality conscious of its own end, and therefore absolutely endearing.

6

It was summer, so I couldn't force my son to cover himself with long-sleeved clothes and gloves so the public transport users wouldn't stare at him. No plane or boat, then. We would go by car, closing the apartment for an indefinite period of time. We packed two packed suitcases because I knew the stay would be long. I would make trips from time to time to get things I needed.

Lucía didn't want to take charge of anything. I even finally proposed marriage to her when the divorce from Samanta was finalized. She replied no, and that for that very reason, because of that proposal I had made so abruptly and inconsiderately, it was better to stop seeing each other. The day before we left was the last time I saw her. We had dinner, made love in a way that made her cry when she climaxed, and half an hour later, I penetrated her again because I needed to make her suffer. To make her miss at least that, to make her regret her decision forever, deprived of the pleasure that I, her man, her only possible man, could give her. But hurting her wasn't pleasure but deliberately inflicted pain, and in the morning she got up very early and dressed. I watched her when she was on her back, buttoning her bra, and I would have liked to help her, as I always did. But I didn't because she suddenly got up, and without turning around, put on her nurse's uniform, picked up her purse from the chair at the foot of the bed, and left the bedroom. I got up and peeked through the door. I saw her go into Homer's room. I heard her murmur something, sobbing, I think. I went back inside, she passed by the door, I heard muffled sounds of a cup in the kitchen, five minutes later she left, closing the front door without a key, because she left the one I had given her on the kitchen table.

Afterwards, we spoke on the phone two or three times, when times and events were different, and the muted feelings implied different needs, and later we wrote letters the old-fashioned way. But never again. I saw her in person, and I would have liked to, even if her appearance was different, because I knew I would always get used to her. But every personal god

vanishes as a result of the fantasies of its very creation. And that's what I was thinking when Homer appeared in my room, naked, asking why Lucía wasn't coming with us.

I watched him standing there, his human hand on the doorknob, his expression frightened but not tearful. Despair never seemed to dominate him; the marvelous logic of his intelligence protected him against it. I told him we would have some breakfast first. We dressed and sat at the table. Our suitcases had been packed two days before, waiting by each of our beds. He drank his chocolate milk and the vanilla ice cream he liked so much. I had a black coffee, but a double one. In silence, without answering his question and without him asking it again, we let time pass in mutual consent, as if it had never been uttered, as if it already seemed so distant and so vague.

At ten in the morning, we left. I locked the apartment with some trepidation. I'm lying, it was with terrible unease. I knew I'd have to come back often, but when I did, no one would be inside, waiting. Homer walked down the hall to the elevator, and while he waited, he looked at me as I double-locked the door and set the security alarm. There was bewilderment in his eyes. I still didn't know what his dazzling mind held. Intelligence was a certain thing, but those intuitions didn't seem to correspond with the logic and deductive reasoning he'd demonstrated. Then, standing there in front of the elevator shaft, as the cables raised the cage with folding doors, I imagined his mind was just that, a shaft in both directions, upward and downward. And his intelligence was nothing more than an instrument for bringing facts and seemingly indecipherable concepts to light and creating the necessary associations. Intuition and induction.

The long-planned and postponed bridge between Buenos Aires and Colonia del Sacramento had been inaugurated just a month before, so we headed there. The bridge's engineering was splendid, and the sun sparkled off the waters of the Río de la Plata. Homero watched, fascinated, out the window for the entire journey of several kilometers. We were traveling at almost noon, so the sun was still directly in our faces, until it began to rise, and only its reflection on the water cast an irritating but festive glow on the windshield. We put on some music, and Homero sang what I had played for him at home. He had a harmonious voice, and he didn't tend to shout like many kids. I accompanied him, embarrassed by my poor pitch, but he laughed at his own joy. I'd never seen him like that. I know that the ghosts of sick children he'd grown up with in the mansion flashed through his head, but this passage over the waters of the wide La Plata River was a kind of recreation that ended when we reached the toll booth and Uruguayan customs. Some military police officers asked me for my car registration and personal documents. They looked at Homero, and one of them crossed to the other side of the car and tapped on the window. Homero rolled it down with his right hand and tried to hide his left, but the officer had already noticed.

"We're going to Montevideo, to Dr. Ruiz's Home for the Disabled," I said, overcoming my wounded pride and the anger provoked by those distrustful looks. The de facto government had been installed a year earlier after

several coups, deep economic crises, and allegations of corruption in the Senate. The last two presidents were political prisoners for high treason: they were accused of financing and supporting maneuvers to reannex the country to the Argentine state.

The one on my side handed me back the papers and, bowing, indicated that I should continue. As we drove away, I looked in the rearview mirror to see the two of them talking to each other, one of them jotting something down in a notebook, probably the car's license plate. I didn't worry about it again during the trip along the coastal road, which was longer but one that Homero, who had so few walks and outings, would surely enjoy. We came across several police stations, where the same procedure and the same suspicious looks were repeated, especially as we approached Montevideo. By three in the afternoon, we were already in the city. The wide streets, still cobblestone or paved, gave the urban area a colonial feel. It was like a less cosmopolitan Buenos Aires. We passed near the port, with old, abandoned boats, some used as museum pieces. The weather had deteriorated; the sky was cloudy and threatened rain, perhaps for the evening. My son had the window open and was shivering.

"Close it if you're cold..."

He smiled at me, lifting it just a little, but enough for me toThe bristling hair on his ape-like arm relaxed. I held his hand while my left continued on the wheel. We drove around and around unfamiliar streets until Homero, looking at the map, directed me down several avenues until we arrived in front of an old, colonial-style building. It was after four in the afternoon, and a Saturday. The neighborhood was quiet, still having woken up from its siesta. There was no sign out front, just a plaque with the name of the place next to the door.

We parked in front and got out, leaving our suitcases in the car. The door was double, but only one of the leaves was open. It looked like a well-preserved old hotel, with two floors plus the ground floor. We entered a hallway with colonial ornaments, leather trunks, and a sort of dressing table with a card holder. Then, a large living room with a wooden floor, on which our footsteps echoed softly. To one side, a large fireplace with exposed brick and a sofa directly in front. On the other side, a large window seemed to lead to an interior garden. The reception area consisted of an old, tarnished counter. I rested my hands on it, and the smoothness of the wood, worn by hundreds of hands, made me feel good. Homero raised his arms to the edge, but he couldn't see anything. A young man with a dark mustache and curly hair appeared through the back door. He was short, and I saw him step onto a small platform that raised him about six inches.

"What can I do for you, sir?" He barely said it when I saw the monkey-like fingers gripping the edge of the counter.

"We're here at the recommendation of Mr. Gustavo Valverde. I understand he's a friend of the director."

The man consulted a minute book. It took him a while to scroll through the long list of names in neat handwriting, which I imagined must be his. His handwriting was elegant, done with an ink pen. His index finger ran up and down the lines for several pages, but I noticed his gaze occasionally stray to Homero's fingers, to one hand and the other, comparing them internally, thinking. I wondered if it wasn't the same Dr. Bernardo Ruiz.

He finally found whatever he was looking for, smiled at me, and welcomed us. He didn't immediately show any interest in seeing Homero.

"Could we see Dr. Ruiz?" I asked.

"He's the one you're talking to, Professor. It's a great pleasure to meet you." He extended his hand. I shook it, and that's when he stepped down from the platform and walked around the counter, raising and lowering the cover that separated him from the room. He looked at Homero with a smile, and at the same time seemed to be conducting a clinical examination.

Homero had let go of the counter, so his tendency to slouch was evident. His legs tired quickly, and he rested his hands on the floor when he was exhausted. Today wasn't a "yes" since we'd been in the car for several hours, so I was surprised that the doctor noticed so quickly, or maybe it was me, who, accustomed to seeing him all the time, had forgotten to notice certain details. What moved me at that time of a cloudy Saturday afternoon, in that old place that smelled of wood and oil, was Dr. Ruiz's look of compassion. A look that would have offended me from any other stranger, on his was certainly different.

He bent down next to Homero, not squatting but on his knees, took his monkey arm, and kissed him as if in a true bow to a visiting prince. Dr. Ruiz seemed like a vassal, a subject dedicated from then on to the service of my son. Homero stared at him, saying nothing, simply letting him do what he wanted. I was afraid he might laugh, as I was tempted to do for a moment. But Ruiz immediately stood up, still holding Homero's hand, and said:

"Professor, I am honored to have you in my home. Please sign the entry form on the counter. If you don't mind, I'll take the boy to the park."

I gestured that it was okay, and while I completed the form I had left on the counter, they went out the window toward the park, which I could see was spacious and lush with foliage. A sound of knocking on wood caught my attention, coming from a distance but undoubtedly from the floors above. When I went out into the inner courtyard, I noticed the layout that colonial architecture had determined for this old hotel. It must have been almost two hundred years old, and various modifications had been made to keep the building in good condition without changing its style too much. The courtyard was very large, with lots of foliage and two or three cisterns. A stone path ran between bushes and low trees, all surrounded by the alternating shade of the three floors of rooms with their balconies.

Ruiz and Homero walked slowly. He seemed to speak to her, without trying to make himself understood, without the usual adult intention of belittlingtheir mentality or intelligence to the supposed point of view of a

child. Both with their backs to each other, one a short, moderately stocky adult with dark hair and a beard, perhaps somewhat stooped, and the other a thin but also dark-looking child, bending as he walked, turning his head toward the other, straining to look at him while listening, and occasionally resting his left hand on the floor when he stumbled. They disappeared around a corner, and I sat down on a wooden bench, staring at the overcast sky behind the tiled roofs of the top floor. All the windows were closed, and there was no sign of other inmates. They must be taking a nap, I supposed, but I didn't see any other staff members either. The knocking sounds continued, intermittently, and seemed to come from the left wing of the third floor, or perhaps the second, or perhaps from somewhere nearby, since I saw no workmen or building materials anywhere. The internal echo must be deceptive, I told myself, and then they both reappeared. Homer was walking exactly the way I'd tried to stop him from doing: faster and more comfortably for him, but alternately placing his fists on the floor, like a monkey.

"Homer!" I shouted, almost without realizing it, and Ruiz looked at me, startled. My son stopped, and I saw the tears that were about to fall from his hard effort to straighten up. I picked him up and carried him to sit on the bench. He tried to keep his back reclined, but both his back and his legs buckled.

"This is precisely why we came, Doctor. We need to prevent your illness from further deteriorating your skeletal system. This place was recommended to me for your physical treatment."

"Professor, I will speak to you sincerely and without euphemisms. I know you are a very intelligent person, and you must have already drawn some conclusions on your own." Who can say that what's happening to little Homer is a disease, that is, what we usually call it? Perhaps it's simply, like many disorders of unknown causes, a different form of manifestation of genetic characteristics, or their changes, as in evolutionary cycles. Therefore, is it right for us to go against its nature, against the natural evolution of the process?

Ruiz had sat down next to us, and I noticed that Homer was listening to him very attentively, now calmer and with his back relaxed.

"But Dr. Ruiz, if you only knew how intelligent you are..."

The other laughed embarrassedly. He covered his mouth with one hand, and his dark twill suit, worn at the elbows, revealed his age. He unbuttoned the buttons, and I noticed his bulging belly. He took a pair of horn-rimmed glasses out of his pocket and put them on after wiping them with a crumpled handkerchief.

"Excuse me, Professor, but I've already noticed what you're saying. There's no need. He'll find everything he needs here. We have plenty of gymnastics and rehabilitation rooms, even a sauna. There are two elderly former Olympic gymnasts on my staff, one Romanian who lost everything to his addiction, and another Polish man who has a heart condition."

"And the other patients?"

"You'll see them..."

"Can we see the room?"

Ruiz stood up, and we followed him back to the reception desk. I picked up Homero, who was still tired, and we climbed the stairs to the third floor. We walked down two corridors to the balcony overlooking the inner courtyard. From there, the garden displayed its strange engineering, a series of labyrinths that weren't labyrinths, but rather filigree drawings. There must have been an expert gardener, no doubt, but at that moment the place looked deserted.

We entered an ordinary hotel room, old but comfortable, with very high, sloping ceilings since it was the top floor. One window faced the street and the other the balcony. The bathroom was spacious, with antique china and a large mirror with rust stains. The walls of the room were covered with wallpaper that must have been put up almost a hundred years earlier. It still remained, somewhat faded but barely peeling, except for some edges. I looked at the prints, typical of fin de siêcle fashion.

I put Homer to bed in the double bed, and he fell asleep. Ruiz smiled.

"Don't worry too much, Professor. I don't have children, but I understand your anxiety; I see this every day. And believe me, I understand exactly what he must be feeling. We all have something strange, something that even we don't understand and that we rebel against. But the cause of happiness is to live peacefully with our monsters, like a kind of lifelong agreement. One gives in and the other accepts, and so on. Come downstairs with me and I'll help you carry your suitcases."

"I have to find a hotel or boarding house to stay in."

He looked at me strangely. "Are you going to leave your son alone? I'm going to think you're a careless father, then, who's come toGet rid of him.

His sarcasm was well-intentioned; I knew it from his curious, almost sincere look, and from the affectionate squeeze of his hand on my elbow. A man usually grabs another man's shoulder out of affection, or simply hugs him. But grabbing him by the elbow showed a shyness or politeness bordering on effeminacy. For a fleeting moment, I remembered Dr. Farías, his torn shirt and sweaty body after I'd hit him, and then... then his body hanging in the darkness.

We agreed that I would sleep in the same room as Homero. But before going back up, he invited me to have a snack, as he called it, since we had been traveling since morning without eating anything. He made me follow him to the hotel dining room, locked. When he opened it and turned on the lights, all the old splendor of an era revealed its remains, timidly preserved. Ruiz went to draw the curtains, opened the windows, and then the shutters. The fading afternoon light streamed in, revealing the dust motes in the air. He turned off the artificial lights, and we approached one of the many tables. The wooden floor resonated and creaked with our footsteps. Ruiz wiped the dust off the chairs and table with the sleeve of his

jacket. After taking it off, he rested it on the back of a chair. He sat down and, seeing my stillness, said:

"Sit down, Professor. Excuse the mess, but patients are served in their rooms; they don't usually leave except at certain times."

I sat down silently, once again suspicious.

"There must be some lunch left in the kitchen. I think it was tagliatelle marinara, if you don't mind if we warm it up a bit."

I was going to decline, but I was really hungry. Ruiz seemed to guess my thoughts.

"Don't worry about the baby. The more he sleeps today, the better. There have been many changes for him. When he wakes up, we'll give him a sumptuous dinner." And he laughed, aware of the artifices of his language, which seemed casual but which nevertheless embarrassed him.

He got up to go to the kitchen. I wondered if he was the cook, the gardener, the physical therapist, and the manager, since the place was known for its solitude. The Saturday afternoon was quickly clouding over, and a scent of storm drifted through the windows. Occasionally, a car passed over the cobblestones, and perhaps it wasn't much different during busy hours or on weekdays. Even the dust settled again with exasperating slowness, lingering in the air for a long time despite the lack of breeze or current on that static afternoon. Ruiz returned.

"They'll bring us everything in ten minutes. How about lunch at four in the afternoon?" I don't usually keep schedules...

"I'd say time has stopped in this place," I said, looking at the ceiling from which chandeliers hung, the deep stone and clay hearth, the elaborate tables and chairs. Everything was a blend of colonial style with refined fin de siècle touches, like the clock on the mantelpiece, the display case with glassware and crockery.

Ruiz laughed with a naiveté that surprised me. Never, in all the time I knew him, did he cease to amaze me.

An old man in a waiter's jacket appeared to lay down a fine linen tablecloth with white embroidery. I read, on one edge, Paris, 1892. Then he brought the Bavarian porcelain plates, the crystal wine glasses fresh from the old display case, which only needed a dry cloth to bring out the slightly golden sheen of the edges again, and the silver cutlery with that faint opacity that age gives them.

When he brought us the wine, he offered us a choice between a 1975 Cabernet or a 1960 Sauvignan. I left the decision to the host. Then the Sauvignan was poured into my glass. I did my duty, and Ruiz smiled at my approval. Ten minutes later, the plate with tagliatelle and the sauce boat was brought to us. Ruiz raised his glass, offering me a silent toast.

The sound of the glass colliding resonated just a second before the engine of a truck debased the air, which in turn was time, the two forming an

amalgam that slowly petrified around us. That place, whatever it was, and whatever it turned out to be for my son, had the double edge of a knife that cuts on one side and flakes on the other.

The past and the future.

Without knowing yet if there were ways to choose.

7

It was during the days of the first week that I observed the slow changes taking place in the inner courtyard garden. Every morning I went out onto the shared balcony of the third-floor rooms and leaned on the wrought-iron railing, with that typically Hispanic air under the tiled eaves, that sometimes I even thought I was hearing a guitar playing flamenco among the bushes. And it was then that, from that harmonious contrast, Hearing the sounds of hammers hitting wood, I wondered where the construction was taking place. Workers were coming and going along the path that led to the exit door onto the street opposite. Dismantled scaffolding leaned against some walls or on the floor, but no longer in use, as if the main part of the project had already been built. They entered and exited the garden's labyrinths, with their tall, exotic plants that made it impossible to see, even from above, the entire network of paths. Yet, something changed slightly, only noticed after two or three days. A single missing plant, perhaps, or a path that slowly led toward the old nursery at the back, hidden by the shade of two leafy mulberry trees. A series of literary images suddenly appeared to me, only to vanish in the face of their own incongruity. A Hawthorne story, for example, but Rapaccini's character crumbled at the sight of Dr. Ruiz.

I would then come in to wake Homer for his morning exercises, and shortly afterward a cook would drop off breakfast, a Black woman, always fussy and muttering bitterly in her old Portuguese dialect. A few days had passed, and the physical therapy regimen began to take its toll on my son's body. He would end up exhausted by nightfall, falling asleep immediately and not waking up until late in the morning. Only on weekends were the sessions interrupted.

It was Wednesday, and it was time for stretching exercises, as well as Mondays and Fridays. The other two weekdays were for strengthening exercises. We had already met the two trainers Ruiz had told me about. They allowed me, and actually required me, to attend each of the sessions in their entirety. After several days, and in the face of Homero's grimaces of pain, which, after my initial reactions of concern, questioning the trainers with a frightened look, moving from one corner of the gym to the other, I began to get used to. But they preferred that I stay, so I sat in a chair to read, casting trusting glances at Homero, who watched me while I sometimes lay face down on a stretcher, or tried to lift small weights and dumbbells. He watched me with a look of mutual intelligence, wiser to comfort me than I was to resign myself to his pain.

Andrés, a Polish former bodybuilder in his sixties, was tall, with somewhat long, straight hair, still blond, and a graying beard with red hair. He tried to maintain a serious demeanor, but his jokes and sarcasm amused us. All sessions were individual, but sometimes he saw two children at a time. Since he was in charge of stretching therapy, they had many techniques for doing it, on stretchers, on the wooden floor, or with pulleys. Sometimes I would lift Homero by his arms and keep him hanging like that for fifteen minutes. I could see the pain on my son's face, but at the same time I could hear the noise of the joints in his back as they released, and when this happened, Homero wasn't able to get up on his own, so I would take him to the room to rest for two hours. Around 4 p.m., the masseur arrived. He was the other trainer, a Romanian who had won two or three Olympic medals in ornamental games, in Munich and Moscow, according to what he told me. He was a little younger than the Pole, but with a small, firm body, short in stature, like a flyweight if he had been a boxer. He was in charge of strength exercises the other days, putting Homero on the machines in the gym, which was downstairs, in what must have been the meeting room of the old hotel. "We're going to get him out of here," the Pole told me, looking at me from the stretcher where he kept the boy's legs stretched out. "And he doesn't complain at all. He's a real man, isn't he?" I asked Homero.

The boy didn't even try to smile at something that didn't require a response. I nodded from my vantage point, already accustomed, already trusting the hands of that man who could have broken every one of his bones in several places if he had overdone it even a little. But the old Pole's light eyes were trustworthy, as were the fingers of those enormous hands with light hair and winding veins. He knew a lot about his work and constantly read specialized magazines on sports and physical therapy. He was very talkative, and one of his routines was to praise the technique of Cubans at the end of the last century, and I read in his words an unspoken admiration for Fidel Castro. "Cuba is dead," he said, as he did almost every day, with a snort of resignation and annoyance. "The capitalists ate it up, and who would have thought it would become just another state of the Union?"

Then he moved on to the more distant past, to the memoryof Europe and the old great wars.

"Just like Poland, annexed by the Germans again and again, eaten to pieces by its neighbors. Like Prussia or the Balkan countries."

"Europe is called Germany," I said, also deliberately ironic about my Italian ancestors.

"You're of Italian descent, aren't you? So it shouldn't surprise you that they opted for Mussolini's school of thought during the Third World War."

"Fascism and capitalism are the same thing, after all. Abusers and criminals," he said, and a rattling of bones resonated in the air. I looked up from my book, startled, and the other boy doing his exercises on a pulley stopped.

The Pole laughed uproariously, and lifted Homer by his legs and sat him on the stretcher, twisting like a dancer. He leaned in front of the boy and asked if he was okay, winking at him. Homer nodded.

"That's it for today... Let's see the other one, the scoundrel and lazy bum in the corner..."

When we left, the other boy, a little older than Homer, and missing a leg and an arm on the same side, was curled up in fear on the seat of the pulley machine.

I took Homer to the room and put him to bed after giving him a lukewarm shower, as required by the rules of treatment. In the afternoon, the Romanian arrived. His name was Borgia. He was the complete opposite of the Pole in temperament. I never heard them exchange more than two words. Simply because one talked endlessly, and the other didn't utter any words other than good morning or good night, there was no chance of any conversation lasting more than a few seconds.

Fridays were sauna day. That's how Ruiz had distributed the time for most of the patients, all boys no older than ten. Everyone left their rooms in their underwear, a towel folded over their forearm and a bar of soap in their hand. Those who could walk went alone because they already knew the routine; others were carried in the arms of the Pole or the Romanian. The sauna operated in a room on the first floor, with a changing room where they left their underwear, each marked with an embroidery the cleaner sewed after the first load of laundry. The only one who entered besides the children was the Romanian, but he asked me to accompany them. We undressed and hung our adult clothes on a rack. It was a dry steam sauna, so the children's deformities weren't hidden. The youngest must have been two or three years old and suffered from a congenital deformity, which Borgia told me was called upper limb amelia. He walked perfectly, but sometimes fell because he lacked arms to balance himself; his hands only grew directly from his shoulders. Others had paralysis in an arm or leg; only one was a quadriplegic, and the rest had chest and neck deformities. Those who could took their seats on the second step of the platform, and those who had to be carried by Borgia took them on the first. He asked me to help him, and so I did with the quadriplegic boy. He was six years old, only a few months older than Homer. He talked a lot, but only kept quiet there in the sauna; the heat tired him, he said. The others weren't known for their enthusiasm either; they were quiet and submissive. They obeyed Borgia or anyone who instructed them, even a stranger like me. They knew me as Homer's father, and when I sat next to my son on the platform, they watched us with curiosity and a hint of anxiety. I wondered about the parents and where they were. I was privileged, it's true. I didn't need to work to keep Homer there, but I also knew it wasn't necessary for me to be living with him, and they realized that.

The sauna session lasted an hour and a half. Every fifteen minutes, Borgia would take each of us to the showers, then put us in a cold pool. I offered to help him, and he agreed, even relieved, I think. It wasn't easy with all those kids, of whom there were ten at the time. In the end, he would give

each of them a five-minute massage, and then let them dress themselves. The disabled waited for the Pole to help them.

I remember it was at the end of the second or third week when the Romanian asked me if he could ask me a question. We were showering, and I said yes.

"What about Homer's mother?" I was surprised by such a question, especially coming from him.

"We haven't seen her in years."

I saw him nod and turn off the shower. He grabbed a towel and, while drying himself, asked, "So how do you manage?"

I thought about the question for a second, then shrugged.

"Whatever," I said, because I already knew what he meant. I was a single man, without a wife and with a son who took up all my time.

He didn't say anything until I left too. I got out of the shower and started getting dressed.

"On Saturdays I go out to eat. If you want, I'll show you around town. I guess you haven't left here since you arrived."

I laughed; it was true. I had no one to talk to except Homero, Ruiz, or the Pole, and in the latter case, I was nothing more than a listener. I told him maybe, if he was up for it. We went out to the inner courtyard. It was almost seven in the evening, and the light was fading, with the mulberry trees and upper floors flooding the entire place with still-pale shadows. And the banging of the construction continued, low and muffled, but insistent.

The next day, Borgia came to get me. Homero was already asleep. The black woman from the kitchen, Irma, was coming to look after him. I didn't really think it would be necessary; my son was almost six years old now, and he knew how to groom himself for a few hours. But Borgia told me we were special clients, and Ruiz wouldn't have liked the boy to take unnecessary risks. He was referring to the money I contributed to the clinic, of course, and that it was more than any of the other parents or guardians, but I also knew Ruiz looked at Homero differently, perhaps because Valverde had recommended us. I had seen the way he stared at the ape-like hand sticking out over the reception desk that first day, even before he saw my son's face.

We went out onto the street at almost eleven at night. It was a suburban neighborhood, with mercury lights as preambles to the center, no more than ten or fifteen blocks away. There were residential homes, but few. Most of the blocks were occupied by businesses and the occasional apartment building no higher than three stories. The streets were paved with cobblestones forming arches, but the trees had been removed from the sidewalks to make way for traffic lights and streetlights. There were few people at that hour, just a few cars heading toward downtown Montevideo.

I thought we were going that way, but Borgia took me in the opposite direction. We turned the second corner, as if we were heading toward the port.

"There's a very affordable restaurant with very good food where I go every Saturday," he told me.

We walked I don't know how many blocks. I looked at the streets and the houses of the old neighborhood, some as old as the 1930s or 1940s, with their facades facing forward, narrow balconies with metal shutters and double-leaf doors, their glass panes shaded by the dimness of the hallways. Several people greeted Borgia, and he returned their greetings with some expression of mutual confidence. We arrived at a tavern with unplastered brick walls, which I assumed were mud, since the building was as old as an old 19th-century grocery store. I stood on the corner opposite a lamppost that was still working, and it was the only light for several meters around. In the distance, the lights of the port could be seen, and although they didn't quite redeem the darkness of that corner, they did bring the aromas of the river, fish, and damp wood, from the dead boats moored at the docks.

We opened the door and entered. There was faint smoke and a strong smell of tobacco and stale wine. The lighting was poor, but enough to see the few tables and chairs, which could be heard creaking from time to time. Many men were sitting playing cards, with bottles of gin or wine. The clinking of glasses and bottles, the sound of liquid being poured, all of it settled in my ears as I listened to the languid voices of the women at the bar.

My God, I thought, what kind of dive did this guy bring me to? And I saw the women's faces with blush, I guessed their bodies beneath their simple clothes, their pretentious hairstyles. They were smoking, and some were already drunk, getting up to insist one of the patrons take her to bed. They returned to the bar, zigzagging, resting their heads on the arm stretched across the counter.

"Good evening, Borgia," said the innkeeper.

"Good evening, Ponce. I'm bringing a friend tonight."

The other man looked at me and extended his hand. I shook it and felt his palm calloused, as if instead of alcohol he'd been serving formaldehyde his whole life.

"Sit down. The same as always?"

"I don't know if my friend wants it," and turning to me, he said, "I usually eat stew and house wine..." Then he winked at Ponce and grabbed my elbow to lead me to a table by a window. The table was large, very old, and the window was high, with dirty glass, which nevertheless allowed a view of the street where a few cars were stopped at some of the four corners. It was a neighborhood of whores, I had already realized, of course.

"I like the stew a lot, and there isn't a great variety to choose from. If you like fish, there's the catch of the day, and it should still be fresh."

"Yes, I think I'd like it."

Borgia slammed his fist on the table with joy, and his face was transformed. The deep seriousness, the almost sadness of his usual expression had disappeared. He shouted at Ponce with a booming voice that the other patrons cheered, and the women's laughter was heard.

Ponce approached. He was tall and thin, wearing an old bartender's uniform. He must have been over fifty, bald and with a thin mustache, a battered face, and a drunken nose that I only noticed when he leaned over to take our order.

"The usual for me, the catch of the day for my friend."

Ponce hesitated for a few seconds, scratched his head, and wiped the tablecloth while he thought.

"There's sea bass, sir..."

"Professor, Ponce, more respect, my friend is a professor of literature at the University of Buenos Aires."

The other man looked at me for a moment, trying to understand.

"Excuse me," he said. "There's sea bass, professor, if you'd like."

"It's fine," I replied. "And what's the side dish?"

Borgia laughed.

"If you talk to him like that, we'll spend the whole night here."

Ponce looked at him, angrily. I'd hurt his pride.

"Salad or French fries," he answered firmly.

"French fries. And what are you going to serve yourselves to drink?"

Borgia couldn't hold back his laughter, and the people at the other tables were laughing too. Ponce was acting now, and I was the only one unaware.

"Get something good out of the cellar, Ponce. Don't be tight-fisted this time."

When he left, Borgia said to me:

"It's a serious case, more intelligent than it seems. Would you believe me if I told you he studied medicine and came here from Rosario?"

"That's why his calloused hands belong to a dissector from a professorship in anatomy," I thought to myself. He brought a bottle of white wine for my fish, and Borgia looked at him in surprise.

"Okay, okay, so you have more things hidden." And what about my stew? The usual poison?

Ponce didn't answer and went into the kitchen.

"He's behaving like I've rarely seen him," he said, "and to your credit, we wouldn't be having a good time at this point."

"Don't you bring friends over very often?"

"I don't. And the ones who approach me are just as bad as the ones you see at the other tables. But they're almost always girls, and they don't mind eating really well, except for the one you know."

I looked around. The women were still at the bar. No one had invited them to anything yet. They weren't very pretty, of course. They were just women who worked for little money and a few dirty caresses that were more like beatings, every night.

The food took almost an hour to arrive. It was after twelve. We had finished both bottles and ordered more. The food arrived steaming and tasty. Borgia was right. He told me the cook was a fat woman from Cologne, a foreigner like him, whom he had met in his early days in the country.

"If you had known her back then..." he said. "We would make love and she would get up to cook, we would eat in the middle of the night, and we would have sex again. That's why she gained so much weight, she ate all the fat food..."

Borgia wasn't drunk, but I think I was. I played along and let myself go. We finished eating, and he asked me if I wanted some action that night.

"Sex and sleep," he said. "Tomorrow we'll get back to business." He called over one of the women smoking at the bar. She approached, swaying more from the heels than from the intoxication. She must have been over thirty, but she was still well-built, with straight brown hair and good legs. I felt them when she sat down and started rubbing them against my pants.

"This is Lucrecia," she told me. She smiled, and I thought of Lucrezia Borgia, laughing at this situation, which resembled a vaudeville Kafka might have written.

"What are you laughing at? Do I have monkeys on my face?"

"Excuse me, I was thinking of something else."

"I don't think she liked me, and I offered her a cigarette; she had just stubbed out the last one in my glass."

"What are you doing?" Borgia said, grabbing her wrist tightly. She didn't resist; she probably knew him very well by now. "Excuse her, she's half drunk. Ponce, another glass!"

She looked at me when I offered her the cigarette. She accepted it, and I lit it.

"That's the way things are done, dear. My friend and I were watching you, and I was telling him what a phenomenon my friend Lucrezia is."

"Two makes twice as much, you know..."

"That's fine with me." Borgia interrogated me with his eyes. I saw the perspective of that night, one I'd practically never had: the atmosphere, the people, the enjoyment. All of it tinged with a great deal of lubricity and also impunity. A night of low blows, in the dark, and with no one but a few accomplices in the secret. More than her, the idea excited me, so I nodded,

and Borgia reached into his pocket and placed some bills between her breasts. She was wearing a white T-shirt without a bra, and her nipples began to stand out. Borgia noticed and laughed, touching her.

"There's nothing like money to turn a woman on, is there?" The question wasn't for anyone, perhaps only for himself.

"Where?" I asked, when they both began to stand up.

"At the house ofThis one... Two blocks away.

We paid for our drinks and went out onto the sidewalk, cold now, rather damp. The cobblestones gleamed a little in the light from the corner, and barking accompanied us as we passed the houses.

"Damn mutts!" she said. Borgia grabbed her by the waist and held her against him as we walked. We arrived at a tall, elongated boarding house. Lucrecia turned on the light in the entryway when she unlocked it, and we went up a floor via a narrow staircase with peeling walls.

The room was narrow, with a bed that took up half the space, separated from the kitchen and cupboard by a curtain hanging from the ceiling.

"Make yourself comfortable, Professor," she told me, and I understood the sarcasm. Borgia went to the bathroom, I heard the sound of the toilet flushing, and he came back without any pants. He sat on the bed and grabbed Lucrecia, burying his face between her breasts.

"Wait a minute," she protested, placing her cigarette on the nightstand. She glanced at me out of the corner of her eye, because I was still standing a few feet from the bed.

"And your friend?" she asked as he undressed her.

Borgia glanced at me briefly.

"He'll come around soon, leave him alone."

I went to the bathroom, with its high ceiling, blue tiles, and very old-fashioned plumbing fixtures. I urinated in the toilet without a lid and flushed the old toilet. Before zipping my pants, I watched them from the doorway, and I felt aroused. Then I undressed. They were almost naked; he had a body in good physical condition for his age, and she was straddling him. Her ass was bobbing up and down as Borgia's member penetrated her, her tits swaying in time. I approached the bed, and she looked at me, not smiling. I think it was better this way. With one hand she leaned on Borgia's chest, with the other she grabbed my penis and put it in her mouth.

And so a good part of the night passed, changing places, orgasm delayed by the effects of the alcohol, and then we repeated it once or twice more. I don't remember exactly. Only Borgia's muffled screams, her laughter and moans, and a couple of protesting knocks on the door from a neighbor in the boarding house.

The three of us were in bed, she in the middle, already asleep. I looked at the wristwatch I had left on the nightstand. It was four in the morning. I turned my head and saw Borgia with his eyes open, staring at the ceiling.

"I think I should be back before Homer's breakfast," I told him.

"You still have at least four hours. Get some rest. Did you have a good time, right?"

"Of course." I didn't tell him that Lucrezia's body, which had excited me, was suddenly nothing more than a thing lying there, emitting sounds like precarious snores. She was a dog, that's what I thought, a dog I saw get on all fours, whom I saw urinate her drunkenness outside the toilet a couple of times. And suddenly, I thought of Rapaccini's daughter, from Hawthorne's story, that dreamy and impossible woman, because she was of another kind, not a human being. Then, covering her with the sheet up to her breasts, because the early morning chill was beginning to enter under the door, I asked Borgia:

"What are they building in the garden?"

He turned his head, looking at me with surprised attention over Lucrezia's body. Then he looked back at the ceiling, sinking back into his usual silence. I didn't insist; I already knew it was useless; he used silence more as a shield than as a way of being.

Half an hour later, he got up, went to the bathroom, and lay back down on the bed, putting an arm around Lucrecia's back as she rolled over in her sleep. The sheet, drawn back, revealed her ass, still red from the night's spanking. Borgia groped her where there were still traces of dried semen, both of theirs.

"This girl likes fucking more than money. One of these days she's going to choke on a cock in her mouth." He slapped her buttocks, but she just turned her head from side to side, resting on her crossed arms.

"They're building a museum," he said, picking up on my almost forgotten question. "In the old nursery. They're putting up concrete walls and remodeling everything inside."

"A museum? What for?"

"An anatomy museum."

I expected her to explain more, but I paused before asking. What was going to be displayed there were undoubtedly cadaveric preparations; I wasn't convinced they were artificial parts. The latter would be false and conventional, and didn't fit with Ruiz's personality.

"And where is he going to get the exhibits?"

Borgia stroked Lucrecia's back with a single finger, as if drawing. In that man's eyes, silence was a wound full of lies, but when he spoke and acted, everything was pure truth. He didn't lie with his words; he deceived with his silence.

"And how long ago did it start?"

"More than four years ago."

"Can we see the objects?" ras?

"I don't know, ask Dr. Ruiz, but I don't think he'll let you. He's not licensed for that yet. Problems with the city, I think."

I got up to get dressed.

"I'm going to the clinic, it's already dawn."

Borgia didn't work on Sundays until six in the evening, when he helped the Polish man with the ball games they played in the yard, at least the ones they could. I left the room seeing them both lying down, she face down, he too, with their eyes closed, but drawing something, I didn't know what, on Lucrecia's back.

The neighborhood, which at night looked gloomy and mysterious, on that Sunday morning was as clear and simple as an abandoned ruin. Old, broken sidewalks, dirty cobblestones, walls riddled with damp. The voice of a newsboy sounded distant, carrying an emotional force that suddenly made me miss my son. The bicycle suddenly appeared around the corner, and the newspaper vendor's shout was a cry of alarm, announcing the dawn, scaring away the fear of the night that had lain half dead on the streets. He and his bicycle frightened it, and I hurried to the clinic before Homero woke up and thought I had abandoned him too.

8

We had been in Montevideo for more than four years. Homero's body was transforming, in its own slow way. It had occurred to me to compare the full-body photos I took of him every month, like documentation of his illness, and every time I took the box out of the closet where I had stacked them with the dates, the contrast and the difference became painful. I preferred to see him, who at that moment, on that Saturday morning when I was looking at the photographs, was taking a bath.

I heard the shower turn off and put the box away. Maybe he once caught me looking at them, I no longer remember, but a kind of shame came over me if he was nearby when I did it. It was like watching him without his knowledge, evaluating him, perhaps. Homer was now nine years old. I watched him come out the bathroom door, naked and drying his hair. His entire body was covered in hair, especially on his arms and legs, thick and coarse, which tended to curl after bathing. Only his chest had more free surfaces. He walked almost upright, and when he was tired and realized his slouching, he immediately corrected himself, even though his face expressed the pain of exertion. The progress made thanks to Dr. Ruiz's treatment was astonishing. Of course, the only goal was to ensure that his condition did not degenerate his joints or stiffen them to the point of being

unable to move. And now he walked without pain, practically with his back straight, except on rare occasions after the intense exercises the Pole subjected him to, with increasing demands. "Good morning, Dad," he said, smiling, and his face, which had slowly lengthened into a slight prognathism, beamed at me joyfully. I had promised him that we would go to the municipal library that day. Homero's intellectual education had worried me again after the first few months devoted to his body, which for a long time had made me feel powerless and bitter. I knew my son's intelligence, that superior intelligence that no one but a few had discovered, but to which no one gave much importance compared to his physical appearance. There was no admiration from the doctors who treated him, nor from the staff who assisted him, but pity, as if he, and even I, needed mercy, which wasn't even free, of course.

In this corner of South America, in this half-forgotten city of Montevideo, in an old hotel transformed into a clinic by a doctor of strange character, Homero's extremely lucid mind was slipping away from me in the face of his changing body. It was as if Ruiz had deliberately ignored that aspect, uninterested in it, or afraid of it. He probably didn't have such apprehension about other patients, but Rumpelstiltskin's illness was almost unknown to him, yet he somehow sensed the contrast suggested by the physical changes and the superior intelligence. Perhaps he too thought, as I had so often thought, that it wasn't really an illness at all.

I spoke to him about it in his office many times, even arguing heatedly and with raised voices. I even suggested threatening to take him away, a petty action, in my opinion, which had nevertheless served its purpose with Dr. Moreau in Buenos Aires. Ruiz sat down again, calmer now, and said to me:

"Do what you want, Professor. You're the father, and you've seen the achievements we've made with Homer."

"With his body, Dr. Ruiz, but I repeat, he needs an education." Bring teachers to the clinic, I'm willing to pay them...

- It's not my custom to bring in outside staff, and it would be unfair to the other patients... - All that argument made me laugh. It was more of an excuse than a reason. "Besides, since he's so intelligent, he'll soon make up for lost time and surpass the others."

Unconvinced, I told him I would dedicate myself to the task. I didn't want to interrupt the progress of Homero's physical rehabilitation, and who knew where he'd find a better place?

"You seem afraid, Dr. Ruiz."

He looked at me fixedly and gave a sarcastic smile.

"Afraid of what?"

He probably meant something else; he seemed more concerned now with the state of his own body, which had curiously aged in the short time since we met, or rather, had worn down and thinned, his belly bulging like those starving children in old photographs of African tribes.

"That the municipality would discover the construction you're carrying out."

He looked at the garden, stood up, and stood in front of the window. The light shone on him intensely, almost transparent. I realized he was terminally ill.

"Good diagnosis, Professor."

I thought, for a moment, that he'd read my mind.

"The place was finished several months ago, but I can't fit it out. I'll find a way."

We didn't discuss the subject of Homer any further. I decided to take him to libraries, buy books, and give him and me a common education. The room already had an entire wall lined with shelves of books I'd found in old bookstores around the city. Homer's interests were eclectic. He preferred the humanities because the exact sciences were so easy for him to understand that they soon bored him. From the subtleties of mathematics, which he regarded as games and mental gymnastics, we moved on to chemistry, with its infinite possibilities, and then to physics, which he ultimately preferred above all others, and which led him to astronomy and sidereal calculations.

That Saturday morning, he approached me, his gaze questioning whether we were going to the library. All the previous day, he'd been thinking about Kant and his premises of pure reason, something that had fascinated him since I'd first discovered him reading. While I was helping him dry off—because he liked it when I toweled his hair down his back—he asked me when my book of reviews would be published. I'd left the editorial proofs in Buenos Aires, all that pending business forgotten. The previous afternoon, he'd received a letter with a copy of the contract and the galley proofs of the book, which was called In the Shadow of Thought. Homero read them in a few hours and told me how concerned he was about my commentary on Kant. He didn't agree with my very literary point of view. It was true, he told me, lying on his stomach on the floor, his elbows resting on the carpet and turning the pages, that Kant's reasoning was fascinatingly lucid, but I was stuck at that point, making no progress.

"Maybe I can't, Homero." If he did, he'd have his intelligence. Men like me enjoy the intelligence of others, and we're content to pass it on.

He remained thoughtful, and didn't return to the subject until that morning.

"I was thinking," he said to me, with his back to me, as I dried him. "The second premise states an empty concept without an object." Suddenly he stopped, and I felt his shoulders move. He didn't cry like other children, but rather emitted languid, high-pitched, and very low-volume moans. His voice, for that matter, had also been changing, strident and brutal when he got excited or angry. A speech therapist came once a week, and helped make Homer's voice more serene. I told him to look at me and asked him what was bothering him.

"Dad," he said, "I've been thinking about what's happening to me for a long time. You already explained my illness to me, but I can't make sense of it." I looked for genetics books in the library, even in the health magazines, and more than an illness, what's happening to me corresponds more to an evolutionary behavior. We're locked in this place because I'm sick, and all of that makes me feel like I'm a concept, but there's no object that corresponds to that. I know it's a trivial interpretation...

"Don't worry, everything we interpret from our feelings is trivial, or superficial, perhaps."

Homer's eyes lost the shine of tears, and he barely smiled at me. I hugged him like I did when he was very little. Around twelve noon, Black Irma brought lunch, and in the afternoon we set off for the library.

When we left, we saw two or three patrol cars heading toward the port area. Homer was curious, so we walked a couple of blocks in that direction. Since we saw there was a crowd further on, I told him they wouldn't let us in. Still holding his hand, I tugged at him, but he resisted, looking toward the place where some police incident was taking place. Although He was dressed in the traditional way for a boy, and people kept staring at him, but he'd grown accustomed to it and ignored them. At the library, he was known more for his extreme intelligence than for his physical appearance. So now, at the end of a Saturday afternoon, in the middle of the cobblestone street, closed to traffic by red police tape, I contemplated a strange landscape, almost a film shot through several lenses simultaneously: the glances of people passing by, alternating between the crowd and the lights of patrol cars in the distance, and the strange figure of an ape standing on two legs, dressed as a man and holding the hand of another who seemed to be his father, not because of their resemblance, but because of the way he treated him. And at the same time, I could observe Homer's fixed gaze on what was happening almost two blocks away, his eyes intensely fixed on something he didn't understand because he wasn't used to witnessing it. Sometimes I felt like confronting the people who stared so brazenly and shamelessly at my son, but I'd gotten used to ignoring them too, though it took me much longer.

"What happened?" Homer asked me. I shrugged, and it occurred to me to ask someone returning.

"Excuse me," I said to an elderly woman who was occasionally glancing back. She was startled when she saw Homer. She had the discretion to hide her surprise from that moment on, unable to avoid glancing at him out of the corner of her eye as she spoke to me.

"It seems they found a very old body at the back of the bar on the corner."

I thanked her, and the woman continued on her way, glancing back from time to time, I don't know if at the crowd or at Homer.

"Come on, Dad, please."

"Homer, you know what's going to happen when we get closer..."

"I know, but I don't care..."

I couldn't deny him that whim; I'd already kept him locked up for most of his short life. We walked those two blocks and stayed behind the police barriers. I recognized the bar where Borgia and I had gone the first time, and to which we returned several times since then until it closed a short time before. People looked at Homero, but they soon forgot about him because a stretcher with a sheet covering what was supposed to be a corpse, but not in its original form, was brought out the front door. I heard people commenting that it had been dismembered, and that it was a woman. They put the stretcher in a forensic police van, and it drove off. The other officers tried to get us to leave; some obeyed, others stayed. There was a smell of putrefaction in the air that became unbearable. A man spoke to me without me asking anything; he hadn't noticed Homero, who was looking toward the door, waiting for more police to come out. "It seems she was killed about three or four years ago, that's what I heard the doctor say."

"And how did they find him?"

"They're going to demolish the place, so someone from the city or the real estate agency discovered him, I suppose..."

Half an hour later, there was no more movement, and it was nighttime. Homero yawned and agreed to let us leave. Suddenly I remembered my nights with Borgia in that bar, and the women we'd met. I thought of Lucrecia, the first one, whom we didn't see again after that night. Borgia asked the patrons and the owner. She'd moved, they told him, but no one knew for sure.

When we entered the clinic, we ran into Borgia at the door. He was out for his Saturday night walk; I hadn't accompanied him for several months.

"They killed a woman," Homero said excitedly.

Borgia looked at him and stroked his head.

"So?" was all she said about it. "See you tomorrow, have a good night." And when I saw him walk away, she winked at me.

We went upstairs and went to bed. My son fell asleep immediately, and I stared at the ceiling, hands behind my head, thinking about Lucrecia. I wondered why she had left the day after I met her. She was a whore, I told myself, like any other, she went where she liked or where she could get a job, but it was only tonight that I realized how intensely I had held onto her memory. Especially the last time I looked at her, leaving the room, she lying face down, her head resting on her hands, the sheet covering her to her waist, and Borgia stroking her back with a single finger, as if making figures on her skin. And suddenly I thought of the nursery, now converted into an anatomy museum. Even though it hadn't opened, Ruiz still didn't allow anyone to visit. I saw him come in every morning, and sometimes he stayed until late in the afternoon. I remembered what Borgia had told me about the museum pieces that very night, and then I got up, dressed in silence, and went out.

In the garden, there were a few lights along the path of the small labyrinth. I trusted my habit too much, and those whoIt took me 10 minutes to walk over and over again along the same paths that deceived me. Finally, I reached the door of the nursery. It was a wrought-iron gate with frosted glass. I turned the handle and realized it was locked. What else did I expect? I asked myself. I looked for a window, and on the right side, I found a skylight. I began to push to widen the opening. The three leaves, made of thick metal frames and dark glass, were heavy, and the hinges were rusty, so it was quite difficult to open them. When I did, I couldn't see anything because it was completely dark inside. It hadn't even occurred to me to bring a flashlight. I went back to the bedroom and took one out of the nightstand drawer. Homer was still sleeping. The other rooms were dark, and only the light from the patio lanterns, languid and weak, remained lit. It must have been 3:00 in the morning, and I wondered how I would get in, and really why I wanted to. Maybe, if I just asked Ruiz, he'd show me inside. But I knew it wasn't feasible.

I faced the skylight again, which was at least a meter and a half wide, and if I managed to remove one of the leaves, I could get in through. I checked both sides of the three and realized it had been difficult to open because the bottom one was uneven. The right side had a raised area where the metal was eaten away by rust. I silently applied pressure on that spot and finally managed to dislodge it. The weight almost made it fall into the nursery, but I caught it and pulled it back. I leaned it against the wall, pulled a flowerpot over, and climbed to the window. I squeezed in slowly, my arms and then my body. I fell to the interior floor and got up. The garden lights provided some visibility, and I saw shadows of furniture. I turned on the flashlight, and the beam illuminated much of the room. There were old display cases, just like in museums, and under the glass were old documents and anatomy books. Copies of Testut in first editions, Grey in different languages, and even much newer ones, like the volumes of Casiraghi.

These display cases were in the middle of the room, and on the sides, against the walls, there were other display cases, but much taller. Bringing the flashlight closer, I saw the glass jars containing anatomical preparations. The smell of formaldehyde was intense. They were cadaveric specimens of all kinds; I recognized lungs, dissected hands, open hearts showing the inside of their cavities, fragments of intestines, sexual organs, fetuses.

I walked from one piece of furniture to another until I came across a large jar that filled the entire width and almost the height of the display case. Floating inside, as he must have been a fetus in the womb of the mother who had abandoned him, was the emaciated body of the paraplegic boy we had met when we arrived. He was complete, not even dissected. His eyes remained open, as expressionless as when he was alive. He seemed to be floating in formaldehyde, because he had been locked in a fetal position, but with his head upright, perhaps the only part of his body that was so rigid it couldn't be tilted. That's why I recognized him, and then I wondered how many of those cadaver fragments belonged to patients who had passed away, according to what Ruiz had said.

During the years we were there, patient turnover was frequent; children died or were taken away by someone. The paraplegic boy had died two years earlier, in his bed, as Irma, who had gone to bring him breakfast, told me. The Polish man went to see him and carried him in his arms to Ruiz's office. They were there for almost an hour. I was busy with Homer's therapy, and I didn't know any more.

I looked through more display cases, and in each one I saw unrecognizable fragments, and for a moment I wondered if it was all a work of my imagination. The boy I'd thought I recognized, in the near darkness, his features distorted by the effects of time since his death, even by the liquid that surrounded him, could have been anyone else. As I was about to leave, right by the window, the last display case had a single bottle on the second shelf. I shone a light on it because it was a head, the only one clearly visible and undissected.

It was Lucrezia's face.

I heard a noise. My God, I thought, if it's Borgia... He was the only one who could be outside on a Saturday at that time of night. Fragments of images surrounded me: the drawings on Lucrecia's back, the cutting lines, the dismemberment instruments, the gloves, the blood-soaked cloths, the bags of discarded organs hidden in the bar's storage room. And finally, the carefully preserved head. Lucrecia's skin remained unscathed, preserved by formaldehyde in a state of virginal pallor, her lips a soft pink, her eyes open, as if surprised, a very light green. Her hairfloating in the formalin, like a jellyfish.

I turned off the flashlight and hid under the window. I waited a few minutes. I peered out cautiously, and although I didn't see anyone, I couldn't trust Borgia, if it was him. Maybe it was my imagination, and I realized I couldn't even trust myself. What would I do if I went out and they found me? I was behaving like a thief. If I waited until dawn for Ruiz to arrive, he'd give me away anyway. And then I told myself it was Dr. Ruiz who was hiding things, and that he should be afraid of me.

But Homer was involved. And suddenly I had this excruciating revelation: my son was one of a kind, an extremely difficult specimen to obtain. Someday, Dr. Ruiz must have thought, he would have him in his museum.

Then I climbed out the window and ran to our room. A light came on somewhere, then went out. I thought I recognized the voice of the black woman, who slept little because she got up very early to light the fire in the kitchen. I woke Homer, who looked at me with sleepy eyes.

"Come on, get up and get dressed! I'll pack the suitcases."

Homer looked at me without understanding. He sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes.

"I'll explain later, hurry up."

"Shall we go? Where?"

I ignored him. He got up and went to the bathroom. I had almost packed our things. We had to leave all the books. Homer came out half-dressed, and I helped him put on his clothes.

"But Dad, what's wrong?"

"I told you I'll explain on the trip..."

"But I don't want to go..."

I shook him by the shoulders, and he looked at me, scared.

"I'm afraid of you," he said.

So many years, my God, so much time taking care of him, to finally hear that. And it was only my fault. I hugged him, and although he resisted at first, he gave in when he felt me crying. It was the first time he'd seen me do so.

We left the room, each carrying our suitcases, hand in hand. We went down the stairs in silence. We crossed the courtyard, entered the reception area, and reached the front door. It was unlocked, because Borgia returned at all hours, and almost always forgot to lock it when he returned. We stood on the sidewalk, and a languid light announced the imminent dawn. We crossed the street to the garage where I parked the car. We put the suitcases in the trunk and sat in silence, staring out the windshield.

I looked at Homero and said:

"Do you remember Kant's second premise? The one that worried you?"

Homero nodded, still somewhat angry, perhaps sleepy in reality.

"Dr. Ruiz wanted to preserve the object of the concept forever."

I started the engine, and we set off toward the outskirts of Montevideo.

9

It was already dawn, but it couldn't have been after six in the morning on Sunday. The road was deserted, except for the occasional truck, which, after honking its horn, would overtake us on the left. I was going slowly, because I didn't know what to do. My first reaction was to return to Buenos Aires, but I knew from the news of the last few days that the conflict between General Oribe's government and the Argentine government was raging. When I turned on the radio, it was still dark, and I learned of the border closure. Oribe had declared a cessation of relations. Political commentators were talking about a possible war, a resurrection of the old conflict for control of the entire Río de la Plata basin. Uruguay was seeking Brazil as an ally, surely knowing that the price would be incorporation into one state or another. There was even talk of an alliance of these allies with Chile, like a new Triple Alliance, this time against Argentina.

I took the national highway north, not really knowing where we were headed. I only managed to drive at a moderate speed, thinking, changing

the radio dial in search of firmer or more hopeful news. But as the sun rose, that Sunday morning surrounded us with a luminosity incongruous with the desolation the news was announcing. We passed towns and gas stations one after another. It was after eight in the morning. Homero was still sleeping in the back seat. Less than five hundred meters away, there was another police checkpoint. We had been stopped once by soldiers with rifles checking our documents. Since we were far from the border, these checkpoints seemed routine, but the soldiers looked at me closely, as if I were a kidnapper.

"Who are you taking?" the first one we met asked me. We barely left the city. It was still dark, and the lights from the police checkpoint blinded me, along with the flashlight the soldier was using to illuminate the car, my face, and Homero's body.

"My son, officer."

The soldier shone the light toward the rear window. My son was sleeping under a blanket, so his appearance went unnoticed. After checking our papers, they let me through. This time it was already daylight, and the soldier stopped in the middle of the road, his gun raised, not aimed. I stopped, rolled down the window, and saluted. Homer was still asleep. The soldier checked my papers and ordered me to open the back door and then the trunk. We were more than 100 kilometers from Montevideo, on a road rarely traveled at that hour, in the middle of a plain populated by windmills and cattle. I resigned myself to obeying. I got out of the car, opened the back door, with a look of annoyance that I didn't try to hide. "It's cool, officer, I don't want the kid to catch a cold," and I pulled the blanket back a little to cover him better. The soldier must have noticed the frizzy hair on Homer's head, but the rest was covered. He seemed more interested in what I could carry in the trunk, so he ordered me to open it. Nothing but the suitcases and the car tools. He gave the order to the subaltern to bring the dog. The German Shepherd appeared half asleep, but became excited as he approached the car. They gave him a sniff of the suitcases, but he wasn't interested. As he passed near the back door, he stopped and stood on his hind legs, leaning against the window.

The two men pointed at me, shouting for me to open up. They moved the dog away, and I opened it. Homer had woken up, looking at us with sleepy eyes, still lying face down, but with his head up.

"What's that?" one of them asked.

I glared at him.

"It's my son."

"Is he talking?"

I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of what was happening to us.

"Look, officer, we can avoid misunderstandings if you'll let me look in the glove compartment for my son's certificate." He has a rare disease...

Still writing down my name, and while the dog continued barking, I got into the car to get Homero's health record.

"Don't be scared," I advised him, but he wasn't scared. He had sat down and was looking at us, still not fully understanding due to the hangover from sleep.

I presented the papers, and the soldier read them one by one, slowly. He glanced at Homero from time to time while he did so, and finally handed them back to me.

"Where are you going, sir?"

What could I say, if I didn't even know. But I was going to say something, some lie that would satisfy him.

"To Brazil, to a specialized clinic." It was the first thing that occurred to me, the most reasonable given the situation, and suddenly, fleetingly, the philosophical idea of determinism passed through my consciousness. Everything we say or do, we've already thought about at some point. I got into the car and looked at Homero in the rearview mirror. "Calm down, we're leaving now," I said, seeing his scared face. He was a child, after all, and his tremendous intelligence and intuitive wisdom couldn't overcome his ancestral fear. I followed his gaze as we walked away from the post, and I kept thinking it was the first time I'd seen that expression on his face. I even think I saw him tremble a little when the dog barked at him, as if he suddenly felt hunted and defenseless.

"Are you hungry?" I asked to distract him. I looked for some music on the radio.

"I need to pee."

"You're right, me too. If you're in a hurry, we'll stop here; there are no gas stations nearby."

I stopped on the side of the road, checking that we were far away from the soldiers. We got out, and Homer started urinating on the side of the road. I did too, and I started smoking. It had been a long time since I'd done so, and I felt the pleasure of that momentary relaxation, the brief and fragile peace of that Sunday morning in the middle of a road I'd never traveled before. Homer stood beside me, contemplating the same thing I was: the countryside, wide, deserted of human life, illuminated by the sun that was slowly warming the pastures still damp with dew. In the distance, scattered flocks of sheep, a few gates, some old windmills. The creaking of broken flagpoles reached us intermittently, as the wind was weak.

God, I thought. I wish I'd learned to pray properly, not even that. I think what I needed was a certainty greater than that peace I knew was as transitory as the seconds that passed. Seconds that were wearing away and rotting somewhere in that world that seemed to have come to a standstill. And since everything is appearance when it comes to time, I wish someone else had been there. Someone to ease my grief and my growing despair. The barking dog, the soldiers, the fear. The uncertainty. I was lost, and as

the cigarette reached its final throes, I knew, with the same unshakeable certainty of the day he was born, that Homer and I were alone forever.

I placed my right hand on his head and stroked him, without looking at him, my gaze distracted by the countryside. He didn't look at me either; he just stretched out an arm and put it around my waist. We knew that at any moment we had to get in the car andWe tried to continue the journey, but we tried to postpone that moment until the essence of it faded, like everything else, into meaninglessness and boredom. And before we could also hate that timeless moment we had experienced as a kind of miracle—because that was the only possible word for it, unrepeatable and already gone—we got in the car and set off again.

We stopped for breakfast at a gas station in a town called Fray Marcos. There was a police station and two or three soldiers, but only the movement of the few inhabitants sped up the morning. A few trucks stopped to fill up with diesel, and the single employee stopped to talk to each one slowly and deliberately. I watched them from inside the inn, Homero and I sitting on two high stools, leaning on a wooden bar, with two sandwiches and two sodas. The crowd, though few, looked at Homer with curiosity, and a couple of kids laughed. The kitchen worker didn't stop staring at him the entire time we were there.

"What's wrong with the kid?" she asked.

"Nothing," I replied. "What news did you get, ma'am?"

She eyed me like a strange creature, suspicious. She wiped the counter with a rag, as if Homer were making himself dirtier than the years had made the already old wood.

"You're Argentine, aren't you? Well, we don't have anything against you here, of course," she said, suddenly affable and condescending. "The president meets with his ministers at noon. They don't say anything else on television."

I glanced at the television on the wall. It was off, and I noticed the cable hanging unplugged.

"It's your fault," she continued. "They talk a lot about democracy and see how it turns out for them..."

Her grimace spoke louder than her words. I paid and we left. I'd already filled up with gas, so we headed back north, along the same route. I didn't know what I was going to do. Just drive miles and miles in search of something uncertain, and yet the concern for the future wasn't greater than the feeling of confusion about the present. A kind of false anger kept me going, knowing that my son and I were the only sane people in this world that slowly seemed to be turning into an illusion, but an illusion with no chance of disappearing. There was only the certainty that it would only get worse.

By three in the afternoon, we were in Fraile Muerto, ancient and famous for being the site of battles and military encounters during the 19th century. However, it was still a very small town, perhaps poorer than

before. A few ruins, old mansions still inhabited, with mossy facades. There was a gas station that looked like it had stopped operating fifty years earlier. There were still old state-owned gas stations, predating, of course, the last two military dictatorships. They didn't serve food.

"There's a grill five kilometers away, along the old road," the attendant told me, as he filled the tank. Looking at Homero through the window, he asked, smiling, "I've seen some weird bugs people bring in, but you're the best of them all. Can I see it?" Without waiting for an answer, he leaned over, still holding the pump hose. He jumped in fright and spilled gas on the ground. "What the hell is this..." He fell silent when he saw my eyes. He closed the lid and charged me, his hands shaking a little.

I started the car and took the road he'd indicated. When I arrived, I parked under the shade of the trees, next to the grills. Several dogs came up to bark at us. I got out and they sniffed me. They stopped barking, but as soon as they sensed Homer's presence, they started again, even more enraged than before. We couldn't stay, it was impossible. And suddenly, a long, wide car appeared, coming from the highway, parked next to us, and the engine stopped. I saw through the windshield that the man was looking at us, perhaps curious about the intense barking of the dogs. The only man at the grill, fat and in a muscle shirt, ignored us, watching the fire and the meat.

The man in the car got out and greeted us.

"Hello!" he said. "Have you eaten yet? Don Cosme makes the best barbecues in the area. I know what I'm talking about."

"We're not staying," I answered. As I was about to get into the car, shooing the dogs away, the man approached us. He was looking for the cause of all the commotion. When he found it, a wide smile spread across his previously expressionless and routine face. He must have been almost sixty, but his hair and beard had barely touched the gray. He was tall, not too tall, thin, and bony. He wore a suit without a tie, and I thought city clothes were strange in those parts. But the car, of course, wasn't suitable for a rancher or farmworker.

He had seen Homer, and that's why he was smiling.

"I see, buddy. Why don't you follow me to that grove over there?" He pointed to a group of trees. More than a hundred meters from the grill. "The dogs aren't going to bother them. They don't stray more than a few meters from the grill. Don Cosme keeps them on a tight leash."

Without waiting for a reply, he got into his car and started driving. Homero and I needed to eat something other than those sandwiches we'd had to interrupt due to the impolite conversation of the employee from the other town. So I followed the elegant Dodge Coronado, which looked like it had been taken from a museum. We arrived and got out. I opened Homero's door and told him not to be afraid. The man approached him and extended his hand.

"Lisandro Gonçalvez, here to serve you," he said. When neither of them reacted, his face took on a darker hue than his skin already had. Deep

wrinkles creased his forehead. And then I saw Homero's expression change. A new confidence flooded his gaze, and he got out of the car. He shook the other man's hand, like an adult, and I felt the strangest sensation since my son was born. No one had ever accepted him, much less demanded him, only Lucía, of course, but I couldn't feel jealous of her. But this time I did feel jealous of this unknown man who had unexpectedly earned my son's absolute trust. Because that was what that unexpected surrender was, after the hours of fear and uncertainty that had confused him during the journey, the soldiers, and the dogs. Then I realized, not yet completely, but the idea was forming in my mind at that instant, that a certain resemblance united them. The dark expression that had taken over Gonçalvez's face a moment before was as old and dominant as the physical changes that had been transforming my son's body.

Placing a palm on Homero's head, they both turned to look at me. Gonçalvez then offered me his hand, and I shook it resentfully. He noticed, but he only returned to his affability, which, while false and superficial, I had to admit was the only one possible at that moment.

"I'll order three portions of asado, if that's okay, and choripanes, if you like. I've got a Chianti in the trunk, there's a corkscrew in the glove compartment, I'll leave that to you," he told me. "And a Coke for the kid, right? I'll get it for him at the gas station; old Cosme doesn't sell that stuff."

I watched him walk away with his hands in his pockets, and we sat on a fallen log to wait. I didn't want to get into a stranger's car, even though he had given me confidence. He came back and seemed surprised that I hadn't brought out the wine.

"Oh man, why so fussy?" I shrugged and didn't say anything, but Homero walked him to the car. He opened the trunk and took out a bottle of wine and two glasses.

"Do you always come prepared?" I asked when I returned. The bottle was cool. He laughed.

"I'm a businessman, I travel a lot. Right now I'm going to Brazil to do some business. There's always work in my field, but these new times are ideal for taking advantage."

I waited for him to explain.

"What field do you work in?"

"We have family businesses. One deals with waste, mainly in Argentina. But we dedicate most of our efforts to funeral homes. From time to time I go out to establish connections with cities in neighboring countries, especially now, with what's coming..."

I looked at him, bewildered.

"War, there are several coming, or just one major South American war. Do you know what they say in Buenos Aires?"

"I haven't lived there for a few years..."

"They're afraid. They say Brazil supports the Oribe dictatorship because they hope to annex Uruguay. The Foreign Ministry is counting on Chile to join them." For our part—you're Argentine, aren't you?—we could count on the support of countries with drug trafficking networks, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, or anyone hoping to profit.

—But I imagine it's nothing more than speculation…

—That's right, but one develops a sense of smell in this profession, if you understand. Death is smelled, not in space, but in time.—And he pointed to Homer, who was eating his chorizo sandwich, seemingly distracted, but I was sure he was paying attention to us.

—For example, your son. He's terrified of dogs, and they are terrified of him, that's why they bark desperately at him. I don't think they would dare attack him with us there, but with several of them and him alone, it would be like being in a jungle. This plain, so vast, is also a jungle. There are miles and miles of nothing, only ditches and pastures, abandoned silos, and small groves like this one.

He stood up to take off his jacket and roll up his shirtsleeves. He placed the pieces of roast beef on two plates and served one for each of us. We rested them on our knees and ate.

"And you, where are you going?"

I briefly told him our story. It suddenly occurred to me that he could be of help. He didn't wait for me to ask.

"Look, I can help you cross the border into Brazil. I'm always there." ly, and going with me, there wouldn't be any problems, even if we were Argentines.

"We'd be very grateful," I said, fervently chewing the meat, tender and well-cooked by the old man at the grill. "You were right about the barbecue," I added.

The other laughed.

"And where are you taking the boy?"

"I don't know..."

"You're quite an adventurer, you don't find that kind these days. They seem to be escaping..."

"And what do you care if that's the case?" I said, leaving my cutlery on the empty plate on the grass. The ants immediately began to climb up.

"Listen, buddy, no more insults, I'm not a soldier..."

"Okay, bad experiences... that's all."

"I understand..." He paused, thinking, holding the glass of red wine in his hand and lifting the bottle with the other, measuring what was left. He offered it to me, and I accepted. I was already dozing, but honestly, nothing mattered to me at that moment more than resting under the shade of those

trees, resting my head against the fallen trunk and feeling the cool night breeze as it drifted across the road.

"I know an anthropological research institute in Brasilia, a bit far away, but if you're willing..."

"Like, anthropological? Maybe if it were a clinic, because of your illness, I mean, you have..."

"Stop, man. Don't tell me what you have because I've already seen it, it's not new to me..." He noticed my confusion.

"Do you think you're the only one? Or have you been told there are a few in Africa? My lord, there are several dozen where I'm telling you. Did anyone tell you it's a disease?"

I felt like the stupidest man in the world. A stranger was telling me what I'd been thinking since Homer was born, but which I never wanted to accept, because to do so would have been to acknowledge the irreversible. Even my own son sensed it more accurately than I did.

I stood up furiously and ignored Homer, who looked at me, frightened, putting down the can of Coca-Cola he'd already finished a long time ago, without asking me for another one, which he was undoubtedly craving.

"Come on, man, don't get so upset. It's not your fault. How could I have known, how could I have imagined..."

I looked him in the eyes, because I had heard in his voice something like a moan, a distantly ancient sorrow, making holes and cracks in the middle of a wall of dark ostracism.

"I'm a professor of literature at the university; I've read so much—philosophy, science, theology...and so blind to reality..."

"Don't be alarmed. Ask yourself what reality is, and you'll see that nothing is so ephemeral. Haven't you often read ancient theories that consciousness is nothing more than what we experience in the present? Is there anything more, in this instant, than what surrounds us?" You yourself, I yourself, are no longer the men who arrived in separate cars no more than an hour ago. If we can't capture a minute of our lives, how can we capture everything the world encompasses, which we don't even know if it continues to exist when we turn our backs on it?

It was almost six in the evening, I assumed, without looking at my watch. A cool wind blew through the trees. Sunday was about to die in complete calm in that place. There was nothing to suggest anything else existed beyond the road.

"That's why in my family we dedicate ourselves to death, Professor, if you'll allow me to call it that. It's the only permanent thing, the only saving grace for sanity. Everything else is confusion and chaos."

By eight o'clock, it was almost completely dark. Traffic had increased. Cars with families probably returning from some ranch to Montevideo, many trucks beginning their weekly trips. I turned on the radio, looking for news about the midday cabinet meeting. President Oribe had canceled the meeting and issued a decree completely closing the Argentine border.

"What do you say now, Professor?"

"That a big deal is starting for you..."

Gonçalvez laughed. We had left his car in the parking lot and asked Don Cosme to keep it in his warehouse for a while. It wasn't actually his car, Gonçalvez said, but a client's, who had died, of course. I wondered how much of his profit was made that way, and I was about to tell him to leave us alone. But Homero had attached himself to him in a way I'd never seen in his almost eleven years of life. He said we could cross the border into Brazil thanks to his influence, and that was what we needed. When he mentioned the anthropological institute, I decided to take him with us. I don't really know whose decision it was, because he, with his casual conversation and a discreet charm that he took pains to conceal, surrounded us with seemingly trivial arguments. When I checked, he'd already left the Dodge keys with the old man and gotten into our car after putting his belongings in the trunk.

"Tell me about that school," I asked.

He cleared his throat. He lit another cigarette; it was his second pack since we met. He lowered his window. Tanilla at his side, and without looking at me, said:

"We'll spend the night in a hotel after crossing the border. Security is likely to be less secure on a Sunday at this time."

"Don't evade the question."

"I'm not, I'm just thinking simultaneously. Look, I don't know Levi personally, and at this point he's already a celebrity. They say they're going to send him as a scientific advisor on a mission to the moon."

"Claudio Levi?"

"That's right, you must know him from his writings, obviously."

I nodded, remembering the theories I had gleaned from his travels in Africa. I had read many of his books at that time, when I was trying to find an explanation for what was happening to my son.

"Levi founded that institute in Brasilia. I don't know if he visits it or supervises it occasionally. I know that, like everything he does, it's backed by high personal standards, so the people in charge must be excellent."

"And they're researching Rumpelstiltskin's disease there?"

Gonçalvez threw his cigarette out the window and looked at me. I felt his dark eyes, his grim gaze, now free of any charm.

"Don't be stupid. Your son is smarter than you, you already know that, I suppose, but also more sincere."

I stopped the car on the shoulder. High beams grazed us, and a shout of protest from the other car rang out like a gust in the night. I grabbed Gonçalvez by the collar, ready to insult him, maybe punch him in the nose. I was fed up with him. I didn't know who he was, or what he wanted from us.

"Why don't you get out?" I said. "My son and I manage on our own, always."

Gonçalvez continued to look at me grimly, no longer charmed or sympathetic.

"Cross the border, and I'll say goodbye."

His dark skin and beard, and his breath almost in my face, suggested the image of a crow to me. I even thought I heard the flapping of wings above the car, but it was simply owls invading the rural night.

I let him go and resumed my journey. We didn't say a word until we reached the border. A series of booths with lowered barriers formed the usual checkpoint, but they had reinforced surveillance. I slowed down and asked Gonçalvez if we could trust him.

"Don't worry."

A soldier stopped us. He was Uruguayan, but there were others from the Brazilian army beyond the barrier. I handed over the papers, and while I was reviewing them, the soldier looked into the car. Homero was sitting in the shadows. Gonçalvez smiled.

"Good evening, officer." I don't know if you remember me, I'm Lisandro Gonçalvez…" He bowed, and suddenly, as if he saw someone he knew up ahead, he leaned out the window and shouted:

"Paulo! Hey Paulo! Here, old man, Lisandro!"

A soldier passed under the barrier and came closer. Suddenly, he recognized Gonçalvez, who got out, and they hugged. They spoke half in Spanish and half in Portuguese. He introduced me to his acquaintance as a university professor who was walking with his son to Levi's high school. The soldier greeted me politely, leaning in close to the window. He looked at Homero, and his expression changed. It wasn't fear, not even astonishment, but understanding. He gestured to the other soldier, who handed me back the papers, and Gonçalvez, after saying goodbye to his friend, amid festive hugs and promises of meeting again, got into the car, and I was given the signal that we could leave.

The barrier was lifted, and we were now in Brazilian territory. The same road, the same nighttime landscape around us. But not the same feeling inside the car. I felt a kind of tremendous anguish, as if all those years since Homer's birth had rushed upon me with their full weight of sorrow, remorse, and fear. I felt that only that night, locked in a car in the darkness of the countryside, under the oppression of constant vigilance for an imminent war, with a child who, in the end, was a being I would never fully

understand, with an unknown man, strange and suddenly unsettling like a crow that had flown in through the window—only that night, I say, did I have the opportunity to glimpse the reason, the motive, or at least the absurdities of a chain of events that were nothing more than time. Nothing more than that: time, which dulls everything, wears away, and leaves the skeletons of the last, and therefore, the only truth. I think Gonçalvez noticed.

"Pull over a bit," he said. I stopped the car again. "Turn off the lights, we're still very close." Immediately, the brightness of the stars fell upon the countryside, revealing the plain of absolute silence. The silence was a space, like a weight crushing the crops, the trees, and the livestock. An enormous press formed by things I knew. And from there came the anguish, really an indefinable and inconsolable anguish.

I rested my hands and elbows on the steering wheel, holding on. Holding him tightly, he placed his head on his arms, and I tried to hide, not from him, but from the tremendous darkness around us, from the silence, so empty, and therefore so oppressive, as if nothingness held the weight of absolutely everything.

I smelled a freshly lit cigarette, the brief aroma first of fire and then of tobacco, and then his voice emerged.

"I like sitting in places like this, at this time. Life is worth living like this, don't you think? It's so, so like death, but it's not quite like that. The stillness, the enormous stillness and silence, without losing the sense of self. Self-awareness, without the knowledge of time. But it's impossible, obviously, one brings the other."

"What pain!" I thought, or maybe I spoke, I don't remember. And Gonçalvez watched me in the darkness. I could see the gleam in his eyes. I began to tremble, and I rubbed my arms with my hands. Then Gonçalvez pulled me closer to him and hugged me. With my arms crossed and trembling, I fell asleep with my head on his chest.

It was morning when I woke up. I was in the backseat, and Homero was sleeping next to me with his head on my knees. Gonçalvez was driving.

"Where are we?"

He looked at me in the rearview mirror and burst out laughing. I looked in the mirror myself; he had deep dark circles under his eyes and his hair was messy.

"Almost 150 kilometers from the border, we still have a little way to go to Rio Grande. Are you hungry? We'll stop for breakfast in half an hour."

"You seem to know this whole region well."

"I told you, it's my job. Besides, family..."

I didn't pay much attention and rubbed my face, trying to clear my head. The morning light pierced the windows with intense, warm reflections.

"...my maternal grandparents. I don't know anything about my old man. Gonçalvez is my mother's last name. She raised me alone and worked all her life in the companies I already told you about."

"Your mother must be a great woman," I said.

She glanced at me in the mirror, searching for sarcasm in my expression, the same sarcasm she thought she found in my comment.

"Why do you say that?"

"Come on, you know what I mean... my situation with the boy's mother..."

"Yes, but I wanted to be sure. Look, my old lady is a strong woman. I owe her everything I am, and everything I'm not, too. Too...how would I say...disapproving. But we never know anything about our parents until we ourselves are parents, and then we get nothing but the excuses they themselves had. There's no true understanding, just a turning of the page.

The road ran peacefully through vast expanses of plains, sometimes filled with lagoons on either side.

"Do you know Laguna de los Patos?" I asked, showing that I knew something too, at least through my geographical curiosity.

"It's a little farther. First we stopped near Rio Grande. How's the kid?"

"Still asleep."

"He seems fine. Last night he acted like a man when he helped me with you."

"What did I do? I honestly don't remember how I got to this side of the car."

"He was half asleep. Homero and I helped him out and get in the back. I envy you the relationship you have with the kid."

"Are you married, Gonçalvez?"

"Yes..." He thought for a moment before continuing. "My wife has been bedridden since she was seventeen, with ninety percent of her body burned. I can't help but admire her strength, and I don't know if it's a will to live or simply that her body is protected by that armor of wrinkled, hard skin. We even had a daughter, and she didn't even complain." She never said if the pregnancy hurt at all, and of course she had a C-section. My daughter is grown up now, and she works with the family.

"You must be proud, then..."

He laughed with such an exaggerated laugh that he moved the steering wheel without realizing it, and the car almost skidded.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's just that... of course, I'm proud, but what can I say?" His eyes suddenly looked at me through the mirror with malice. There was anger and deep sadness. They were echoes of something more distant than the countryside, flatter and more monotonous than the plain

we were crossing. I remembered my friend Víctor and his wife, also bedridden in Buenos Aires.

"Clarisa has been like this for almost twenty years. She can't move, she can't get up, she has thousands of complications, and the doctors come every week. I look into her eyes when I sleep with her, because... you know... I can't stand being with her for too long... but I can't leave her, of course." Making love to a woman like that... and as beautiful as she was when I met her... Sometimes, sometimes I say to myself... kill her, Lisandro, do yourself a favor. But when I look into her eyes, she reproaches me, as if she could read my thoughts. Women, my dear, you must have already figured it out. They know everything, and they play dumb when they want to.

I looked at Homer and thought of Samantha. I was completely alone in the middle of a road unknown to me, in a region that It could have been the end of the world, in a time of international crisis, far from my city and my home, without a job, with only a plastic card linking me to a bank account that was the only sure guarantee for us.

Where was she? I wondered. Had he never even been curious about how his son was? Then Gonçalvez's last sentence resonated like the echo of a proverb. The slight accent, almost imperceptible in his speech, brought back reminiscences of religions or sects, of rites that culture has irreversibly associated with those regions of Brazil. There was still a long way to go, thousands of kilometers before he would feel a distinct force, but Homer was already beginning to perceive it. His sleep became restless. His ape-like hands opened and closed restlessly. His throat emitted moans of pain, as if he wanted to speak but couldn't. I knew he was dreaming, and I thought about waking him, but I wondered what right I had to do so. The pain doesn't stop, it only postpones. Then he squeezed my knee and woke up with a start. His bewildered gaze was worthy of pity. He not only seemed lost, but for a moment, he was literally lost. He looked around, at us, and outside the car. When he finally recognized everything, he rubbed his eyes and waved to me.

I asked Gonçalvez to stop.

"Good morning, Homero," he said. "We'll stop in ten minutes."

A gas station on the right rose up on a hill. We had begun to cross short bridges over rivers that were sometimes dry and sometimes slow-flowing. When we arrived, we had the car reconditioned and pulled into the rest stop.

Gonçalvez waved to several people. The people looked at Homero for a few seconds and then paid no attention to him. We sat by one of the windows, from where we could see an immense silver surface—the Laguna de los Patos. That's what they called it, but it stretched for hundreds of kilometers. Somehow, I felt like I was looking at it, as if I were seeing a remnant of the plain we had left.

We had breakfast and stayed until noon. We bought provisions for the trip and continued on our way. I got back behind the wheel, following the signs

or asking Gonçalvez. The day was splendidly bright. I looked for music on the radio, and after the usual political news—the president of Argentina had resigned, and the vice president had decided to declare a state of siege—I found a Bach partita for harpsichord. Suddenly, the rhythm, or rather the sound, began to metamorphose, and I thought I was hearing an accordion playing a kind of chamamé of high polyphonic quality. It was the place, perhaps, that suggested it to me, but it was also the ancestral roots of traditions, which travel from one place to another and are transformed. There are always clues, signs that you have to know how to look for. Homer bore those signs in his body, making them evident like an unconditioned reflex. Not only in his appearance, but in his reactions, like the look I saw when he woke up that morning. He came from some region still too distant, deeply green, so much so that it was almost dark among tall, leafy trees. A tangle of grass and vines trampled by bare feet running headlong, aimlessly, only escaping. Desperate cries and screams of monkeys came from all around.

I looked at my son, next to me in the seat next to me. Gonçalvez was lying in the back seat, I suppose asleep.

"What did you dream this morning?" I asked.

Homer looked at me, bewildered; he was thinking about who knows what.

"About us, Dad. But we weren't in the city, but in the jungle. The tribes were attacking us, chasing us, naked men with spears."

"You and me?"

He paused, not because he doubted it, but because he was worried about whether he would tell me.

"No, Dad. The monkeys."

From behind came a sound, like a mocking gasp. Gonçalvez knew.

We traveled for more than a week. We passed through Curitiba, and then Gonçalvez said he had some business to take care of in a town twenty kilometers off the main road. It was eight at night, and I told him I wanted to stop at a hotel and rest.

"All the more reason," he replied. "There we stopped at the house of an acquaintance. We had homemade food and slept in good beds. I'll drive from here."

The town was called Bom Jesus. It was already night, and all we could see were a few houses with lights. The streets were deserted and dark. A few dogs barked at us as we passed slowly by, because Gonçalvez also seemed lost. He looked for the addresses of his acquaintances, but there were no signs on the corners and the houses had no numbers. Finally, he stopped in front of a shack. A tall, skinny, dirty boy was sitting by the door, playing with a dog. When he saw us, he got up and went inside to tell someone.

Someone. The animal started barking at us. Gonçalvez opened the door and said:

"Calm down, Beast. I'm your friend Lisandro."

The dog fell silent and wagged his tail, jumping around. Suddenly, he sensed something, maybe a smell, because Homero hadn't gotten out yet.

"I'm going to introduce you to a friend," he said, and began to open the door.

"No!" I told him.

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing."

My son was trembling, but he obeyed. I stood between them, but the dog, after sniffing me, ignored me. Homero walked toward us, while Gonçalvez crouched next to the dog and spoke in Portuguese in his ear.

When my son was next to the animal, it began to sniff him, excited, but still with Gonçalvez's voice calming it. Then he sat down and stayed still from then on, letting Homero stroke his back.

The boy and a black woman reappeared through the door of the shack. She introduced me; she didn't speak any Spanish. She was kind and helpful, but I think she was afraid of me. She treated me with respect, not daring to shake my hand when I greeted her. She led us into the house, old and rickety, extremely poor. A wooden table, three chairs, and the kitchen, where a pot was heating over a wood-burning oven. She wiped her hands on her apron and asked Gonçalvez something.

"Ask if he wants something to drink," and laughed. "Good people, too good people. The only thing they have is homemade tequila; even the boy drinks it, of course." She spoke to the woman, and she brought a bottle. Then she returned to the pot and continued stirring.

The tequila was strong, but it did me good to take some of the fatigue from the trip away. I asked what they could serve us to eat in that house.

"Don't jump to conclusions beforehand; they're poor, but the little they have is good. You'll see what comes out of that pot..."

The woman began to feel comfortable, especially with Gonçalvez. She sat next to him and touched his hair, and he hugged her by the waist. I looked at them without understanding anything, only catching the occasional word. At one point, they became serious; she spoke for a long time, pointing to the door at the back.

"Her husband has been ill for six months. He's dying of cancer."

I wondered what he had to do with them, because when we were on the road, he said it was a business matter. They got up and walked toward the door of the room, which was actually a metal sheet separating the two spaces of the shack. Gonçalvez suggested I accompany them. I refused; I didn't want to know anything about all that. I would have left at that moment, but I was too tired. They went inside. I sat there looking at

Homer, still, without taking my eyes off the dog, lying on the floor. The contents of the pot began to bubble, and after a while I decided to check on the preparation, whatever it was. I stirred for a while and removed it from the heat. It didn't smell bad, and I felt like eating something. I looked at the metal door and went to tell the woman. When I entered, they were both kneeling on either side of a bunk, on which lay the body of a man. The boy was at the foot, also kneeling and praying. The entire room was filled with crucifixes and images of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Images in prints and paintings, wooden and ceramic sculptures, rosaries of all kinds, even made from land snails, or from bottle glass and iron. On the shelf above the dead man's bed were half-burned candles. An intense smell of incense began to intoxicate me. Gonçalvez looked up and sneered. He signaled to the boy, who stood up without asking anything and left, walking past me. Outside, I heard the trunk of the car closing, and immediately the boy got back in. He was carrying a burlap sack, not very large but difficult for him to carry. I wondered how the bag had gotten into my car, but at that moment the boy dropped it next to the bed. Gonçalvez stood up and began to untie the knot that closed it. The woman was still praying, her eyes closed and her hands clasped, resting on the old blanket that covered the dead man. Gonçalvez opened the sack and began to take something out, placing it on the bed. I couldn't see what it was because his back was turned and he was casting a shadow. I moved closer; I couldn't help myself. And I saw him place, first around the body and then on top, indefinable objects, like waste that had once been carried out of that same house for years and years. Things that no longer had a smell, because they were dead; even the state of putrefaction had already stopped, leaving only dry remains. They were all the things that man had had perhaps for his entire life: family belongings, old documents, dried remains of half-eaten food, bones, torn fabrics from old clothes, syringes, medicine bottles, papers, bottles, dolls, rusty weapons. When the things were already overflowing from the bed, They kept coming out of the bag, endlessly.

I looked away, exhausted, and left the room. I took Homero out of the house and we got into the car. I noticed Gonçalvez had the ignition key.

11

That night, Homero and I slept in the car. Even though Gonçalvez came out several times, trying to convince me to get in, I wouldn't give in. I wasn't angry with him, just very confused, and that was what infuriated me. It was a mass of doubts gathering inside me, and all of them found a suitable excuse in Gonçalvez's strangeness.

"Who are you?" I asked him, without using the familiar form, because he was a stranger again. He leaned on the car door.

"How...?" His falsehood was more evident to me than before. Then he smiled a little. "Lisandro Gonçalvez, at your service," he said, sticking his hand through the window.

I glared at him so furiously I could have punched him in the face, holding his arm against the door.

"What are you, I mean?"

"What am I? A man, a friend of mine, simply, but who, like you, hasn't chosen his life. Some have called me many different names, but the least humiliating, and perhaps the most appropriate, is messenger."

He didn't need to say more. His face was as dark as mud.

"Maybe Homer wants to sleep inside."

We both looked at my son, whose expression suddenly changed. I knew he was tired, having endured an exhausting journey, and on top of that, I was forcing him to refuse a bed for at least one night after several days of sleeping in the car. I could see on his face that he was willing to accept, but I said,

"No, thank you. My son and I are fine." I'd leave now if you'd be so kind as to give me back the key.

Gonçalvez hissed and grimaced in disdain.

"Don't act like a sissy, it doesn't suit you. If I'm not giving you the key, it's because you seem stubborn and capable of having an accident at this hour."

"What does it matter to you?"

"It matters to me, because there's always a time, dear."

He went back to the house. I couldn't fall asleep for over two hours. Homero lay down in the back and pretended to rest. I reclined the seat, but, unable to find a position that suited me, I stayed awake almost until dawn. I heard muffled screams from the house, a woman's moans. She and Gonçalvez were on the floor, perhaps next to the dead man's bed. I promised myself I'd get out of that place as soon as dawn broke. And suddenly, I fell asleep.

When I woke up, a cool breeze was blowing through the window. Mosquitoes were swarming me, and I slapped my face and arms, trying to swat them away. The shack was quiet, illuminated by the sun shining directly at it, painting it shades of ochre and silver. The lot on which it stood was occupied by vacant lots and broken iron bars. A couple of abandoned, rusty cars were longtime residents of that place. Around it were other houses that were just as dilapidated, or even more so. Some dogs wandered past, sniffing the car, and barked.

"Good morning, Dad."

Homero climbed up the back and sat next to me. He wasn't afraid of the dogs barking anymore, at least that's what he pretended to be.

"How are you feeling? I'm sorry if I made you sleep here. But I don't like that guy anymore. I'm going to go inside and get the key."

I got out of the car and knocked on the metal door. When they didn't respond, I went inside. The boy was sleeping on the kitchen floor, next to Bestia, the dog. I searched the table, but didn't see the keys. I decided to go into the dead man's room. The bed and his body were still the same, the candles burned out, and Gonçalvez and the woman on the floor. She was covered with the sheet she had taken from the dead man, Gonçalvez naked beside her. He opened his eyes and placed a finger to his lips, signaling me to be quiet. He got up slowly, searched for his discarded clothes.

Without dressing, he began to prepare the wood-burning oven and placed a battered coffee pot on it.

"Coffee from Brazil, friend?" He laughed softly, looking at the boy in case he woke up.

"Give me the keys."

"Are you going to leave me here abandoned?"

"You won't lack company..."

He laughed again, louder, and hit me in the chest in a friendly way. He thought he'd finally found a partner, and I don't know why, but suddenly I felt that was the case.

"Seriously, old man, let's have some coffee and head out. We still have a long trip."

I sat down in the same chair as that night. The tequila bottle was empty and the wood of the table was sticky.

"I'm glad to see you're in better spirits, dear."

"You mean: with common sense. It seems we're in your hands..."

"Don't be melodramatic again. Common sense has nothing to do with it. Men always act on impulse, even when we think we've been going around in circles over the same idea. You're undoubtedly realizing something you're discovering about yourself. Homer, at his age, knows more about human beings than his father. Tell me, what are you feeling right now?" he asked, pouring the coffee into two wooden cups with cracked edges.

I grabbed the one I could afford and sipped a little of that coffee, which I thought would be horrible and old, but which was thick and strong. Perhaps the best I'd ever tasted. Without hesitating too much, I said:

"Furor."

Gonçalvez didn't allow himself to say the traditional "I told you so." His silence was equable, and from that moment on, I knew I wouldn't get rid of him.

Half an hour later, we were back on the road. The woman prepared us some food for the trip, and we said our goodbyes. Homero and I had changed clothes, and when we put our suitcases back in the trunk, I looked to see if there was a bag like the one I'd seen last night. None, and I didn't

ask any more questions, nor was I curious enough to ask. Gonçalvez was no longer just a traveling companion, but an accomplice.

For more than a week, we traveled slowly, stopping every night at a hotel. Sometimes we got up late because we drove until the wee hours. It was cooler, but the headlights and bumpy roads also made me uneasy. If it had been up to him, we would have traveled only at night, but in that regard, I didn't give in. I was afraid for Homer.

The landscapes changed randomly for anyone who happened to witness our journey. One hour we would pass through open, almost desert-like countryside, then a series of hills with vegetation that gradually turned into jungle, until it suddenly disappeared and gave way to a village of low houses, and then a city. Gonçalvez would name the places one after the other, but he didn't always get it right. Then we would laugh, the three of us, while Homer went from one window to the other pointing out things and places, until he chose to sit in the middle of the back seat, resting each hand on the backrests of the seats. I could feel his hairy hand near my head, and I was happy to see him laugh that way.

We stopped at gas stations approximately every four hours to fill up with gas, use the restroom, or buy something to eat or drink. When we were sixty kilometers from Sao Paulo, the engine started to make a loud noise. Gonçalvez, who was driving at the time, and I exchanged glances. The car slowed down. We pulled over to the shoulder. When he tried to start it again, it didn't respond. He got out and lifted the hood. I got behind the wheel.

"Do you see anything?"

"Nothing, and besides, I don't know anything about mechanics." He approached, looking as if he expected me to laugh at his bad joke. I got out and did the same thing he did, staring blankly.

"We need to call a tow truck. Hand me the papers from the glove compartment, Homero."

The emergency services arrived after an hour and a half. Gonçalvez arranged the details with the mechanic. They would take us to Sao Paulo; there was a garage he knew.

The three of us got in the car, and the tow truck slowly towed us away. About two hours later, the city began to reveal its factories and industrial neighborhoods long before we reached what wasn't even the center, but one of the many neighborhoods on the outskirts. We were driving down the middle of a wide avenue, overcrowded with cars, trucks, and buses. Buildings alternated with shops and supermarkets, and people clumsily walked among the street stalls. The tow truck stopped in front of a garage, and a man got out of the cab and asked something I didn't understand. Gonçalvez got out of the car.

"The guy says he's going to check it out."

We went to kill time at a bakery on the corner. It was a working-class neighborhood. The waiter looked at Homero, as did the people at the neighboring tables, more with pity than fear. My son ignored them, staring at the walls, seeming to study the advertising posters. Then he placed his order in Portuguese. Gonçalvez stared at him, as did the waiter, but not because he knew his language, since he couldn't have known we were Argentinian, but because of the diction Homero had used. I learned this later, when Gonçalvez told me.

"The boy used pure Portuguese, not the convoluted and dialectical Brazilian we have here."

"I've never seen you read books in Portuguese," I told Homero.

"I've never read them; I just got used to the language since we crossed the border. From listening to you speak and reading the signs."

I wasn't surprised, but Gonçalvez wanted to know what else I could say in Portuguese besides ordering a snack. Homero thought for a minute, looking out the window at the traffic, watching the people passing by on the sidewalk. And he began to recite verses in Portuguese. When he stopped, he turned his gaze to me. I felt ashamed for not understanding him, because he had spoken to me through those verses, I was sure of it. After a moment of astonishment, he said:

"Sitting by the window,

through the snow-fogged panes,

I see her lovely image, hers, as

she passes, passes, passes by."

I swallowed because a lump formed in my throat. I looked out at the street, searching for what Homer had seen or glimpsed through the cracks in the window. Reality. His mother, once again, from somewhere, was involuntarily manifesting herself.

"A poem by Pessoa," I said, because Lisandro was looking at me inquiringly.

"Ah, the one about heteronyms. Very intelligent, the boy, of course, and very opportune. Silent and pathetic as a judge."

That anger seemed strange from Gonçalvez, directed at Homer, for whom he had felt such affinity. Well, I thought, perhaps precisely for that reason.

The waiter brought our order, and when we finished eating, in silence, we began to talk about what we didn't want, but suddenly, this conversation between three people who were beginning to think and act in an extremely delicate circuit of thoughts seemed inevitable, and even satisfying.

"Each man is many men," said Homer, initiating the conversation, giving the previously established premise, but summarizing it as a starting point, free of pain and resentment. And so we talked and talked, ordering more coffee and then beer for us. Homero first drank soda, then coffee too. The street was getting darker, and the bar's lights came on, mirroring the

windows, reflecting us, until we realized where we were and why we were there.

Lisandro got up and ran to the garage. Homero and I waited, and I asked him to recite some more of Pessoa's verses, but before he could start, Lisandro returned. He sat down, leaning his elbows on the table and taking a sip of beer.

"He's dead..."

"Who?"

"The car's dead, a bunch of parts need replacing, and they don't have them here. They gave me the address of the branch in downtown São Paulo."

I grabbed my head, and Lisandro pulled my hands so I could look at him.

"Dude, don't get all worked up. It's not worth it. You guys have to get to Brasília." There are trains arriving in the mid-afternoon.

"And you?"

"I have other things to do around here and in the surrounding towns. It seems the persecution of the Uruguayans hasn't reached this city yet, so people are busy with their own things and aren't going to worry about a couple of Argentinians, especially you guys, I mean," and he nodded at Homero.

"You're right, Dad. Pity always helps."

Seeing and hearing Homero speak like that gave me the feeling he was a different kid at that moment. His intelligence was awakening from the years of confinement he had been kept in. I was worried, however, when I saw some people looking at us with malice when they heard us speaking in Spanish. They said nothing and walked on by. We paid for our drinks and wandered the streets during dinner time, looking for a hotel. No clean place seemed to exist in that neighborhood, so we walked toward the center until we found an old hotel on a street that still had the cobblestones of the old neighborhood.

We checked in at the front desk, and as we were about to go up the stairs, Gonçalvez grabbed a copy of the newspaper from the counter, the front page of which had a big headline announcing a coup d'état in Argentina. Once in the room, we each sat on our beds. We were very tired, and Homero had fallen asleep, I thought at the time. We hadn't had dinner, but I decided to leave him alone. I got up and went to the bathroom. Who knows if they had cleaned up after the last tenant, or maybe it hadn't been in months. The toilets had rusty water and the faucets squeaked. The mirror was small, but still enough for shaving. The shower and bathtub were still there from at least the beginning of the twentieth century. I let the water run until, after ten minutes, it was hot. I undressed, ready to take a long, slow bath.

"Listen to this!" said Gonçalvez, starting to read the newspaper. As I got into the tub, I heard his voice reading. The president had been overthrown

by a military coup that morning. General Livingston had been declared the new president.

"He's a military man, one of those they call moderates," said Gonçalvez. "He's also a lawyer and a very cultured man, so they say. It seems they're trying to gain acceptance from the general population, which they'll undoubtedly get, especially from the upper classes."

I was lying in the tub, my arms on the side and my eyes closed. I imagined Gonçalvez sitting up in bed, his back against the pillow resting on the headboard, his shoes off, his socks smelling dirty, and his shirt unbuttoned. His voice sounded dark and foreboding. I don't know why this occurred to me, but I wasn't willing to let myself be defeated by bad and illogical premonitions. Not at least at that moment when I felt so good and calm, as if my entire past, the country and the city where I was born and lived, were on the other side of the world, or had already ceased to exist. As if what I heard from the room was a story told by ascience fiction author.

"Look at you! He's been married for five years to a lawyer from Buenos Aires. Apparently she's famous for winning a multi-million dollar malpractice case..."

I opened my eyes, my hands clenched into fists, pressing hard on the sides of the bathtub. I was about to ask, but didn't say a word. I let the other man continue talking.

"She's the new chief of staff." He was silent for a moment, during which the sound of paper being turned could be heard. I imagined Gonçalvez quickly scanning the news.

"There's an interview with her here. Her name is Samanta Bernárdez. The journalist tries to get her to talk, but she seems a bit closed-minded. There's a career report. Ten years ago, she won a lawsuit against the Farías clinic, where her son died at birth."

So I got out of the tub, ran into the bedroom, and while I yelled at Gonçalvez to be quiet, snatching the diary from his hands, I glanced at Homero. He was leaning on the bed, looking at us. His gaze was fixed on both of us, but I know he was looking much further, both in time and in the space that surrounded us. I leaned closer, trying to read in the depths of his eyes something more than the obvious sadness. But his gaze didn't require comfort, nor did his body, which was no longer what it had been. I tried to get him to bring his monkey-like head to my chest in a hug that I needed most, and it was he then who understood, the analyst of my soul. He wrapped his long arms around me, and I felt the soft hair on his body, and his timid tears. He stood up suddenly and began to undress. He went to the bathroom and got into the bathtub still full of the water in which I had submerged myself. Gonçalvez watched us, slowly understanding what was happening. I peeked through the bathroom door. Homero was scratching his body with an old brush, left on the ceramic soap dish attached to the wall. I watched him scratch again and again, getting harder each time, until I realized he was going to hurt himself. I approached and grabbed his

wrists. He didn't dare look up. I could feel his arms tense and hard like tree trunks.

"This body, Dad...!"

He had never said anything like that, so austere and illogical, like a fragment of a very old thought that would continue much later. It was more like a cry of anguish that suddenly burst into a spontaneity consistent with what we call despair.

I sat on the edge of the bathtub, holding his arms because he wouldn't stop moving. He was shaking his head, trying to bite himself.

"Lysander," I called. "Help me hold him down."

He went in and grabbed his head.

"Hold on a bit..." He went to get a towel, tore off a piece, and told Homer to bite it.

My son did so with anguish pouring from his eyes, all the hair on his body standing on end despite the water. I felt my skin overcome by trembling and shivering. I was afraid. I thought of convulsions, some hysterical attack. I didn't know how his mind could work. What the others saw now, I saw. And I was so afraid that I think it expressed itself in my eyes and my body. I was trembling too because I was still naked and wet.

As Homer calmed down, I still didn't want to let go. We pulled him out of the tub, against his resistance, but we managed to sit him on the edge. I held him tightly, one hand squeezing his, because he kept hurting himself with his nails. Lisandro grabbed a dry towel and placed it on my back, covering us both. Then he left and half-closed the door.

"It's over, Homer... son... my dear son... everything's okay now... everything's over... I'm with you and I'll never, ever leave you alone..."

What had been anger and pain transformed into a low, muffled moan. It wasn't a boy crying, it was the wails of a beaten animal. It wasn't a man. It wasn't an animal. It was something that had annulled itself. Unsurprisingly, I heard our thoughts merge.

"An object void of an object," he said, quoting Kant's third premise.

And he looked at his hands as he said it, now calm, serene, and wise.

When Homer finally fell asleep, it was twelve-thirty at night. I covered him with a blanket and stared at him. Gonçalvez put a hand on my shoulder and said,

"Let's have a drink and a bite to eat..."

I shook my head.

"That's fine, but I don't think you do. Let's relax for a while..."

We left, but I took one last look at my son. We went downstairs and asked the concierge where there was a bar open. Once on the street, we turned right. Right on the corner was a bar that was closed when we arrived because it opened after 9 p.m. Lisandro ordered drinks and a couple of sandwiches. We sat down to wait. All the tables were full. Many looked like students from some conservatory; there were instrument cases under the chairs. They brought us our order. Drink. We ate in silence. Gonçalvez lit a cigarette and offered me one. More than three-quarters of an hour had passed. The students had left, a couple of them staggering, surrounded by the smell of marijuana on their clothes. From the street, we heard a couple of screams and broken glass, then laughter that faded away.

When a black woman came in and sat by a window, Gonçalvez looked at me, seeking my complicity. I returned the look, not the smile. I was alone, and although she didn't look like a prostitute, she definitely was. Gonçalvez's insistence on staring at her made me break the silence.

"If you want to screw her, I'll leave you alone. I'm going to sleep." I stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray and asked for the check. Lisandro grabbed my hand and told me not to leave him alone, that black whore was definitely in the mood for two. I told him again that I didn't want to, so he insisted that I at least wait for him while he fucked her. Then we left. He even bought me another beer. He laughed as he talked, never taking his eyes off the woman.

I agreed, and he patted me on the face. He went over to the black woman's table. He sat down across from her. I watched them chat for no more than two or three minutes, then they got up and walked toward the men's restroom. The bartender glanced at them for a moment, making sure the woman had seen him. I think she nodded before walking through the door, followed by Gonçalvez.

I drank my beer. I felt uneasy, nervous. And I realized I wasn't thinking about Homer or the time or anything else but about that woman I'd seen for barely a minute, and whose body had been growing in my imagination all that time. I got up and went to the bathroom. It was small, with one sink, one stall, and two urinals. The black woman was bent over, her hands resting on a urinal, while Gonçalvez penetrated her from behind. His pants were hanging down, and his ass was covered by the hem of his shirt. I entered, like a casual customer coming in to urinate. I stood in front of the urinal next door and began to pee. Lisandro looked at me with his usual smile. The woman raised her head and looked at me without saying anything, but knowing I was next. When he was about to finish, Gonçalvez uttered several obscenities in Portuguese, and the woman responded in kind. He pulled away and lifted his pants. I stood behind her and penetrated her. Gonçalvez waited; I could see him watching us in the mirror.

The woman was now moaning and moving a little. Was she tired? I wondered. She turned her head several times to look at me, and her expression was pained. Lisandro was smiling, and at one point he said, "Come on, man, go all out for the whore!" But I don't know if I actually

heard him. I know I was more aroused than I thought, and my body was moving vigorously. The woman's elbows were bent because I was pressing her against the urinal. Her face was almost in the toilet seat, and when I was about to ejaculate, she screamed, her voice muffled. I was just about to pull out of her when the door opened. It was Homer, his eyes sleepy.

The black woman then saw him and started screaming hysterically. I didn't understand why. Since we had entered Brazil, they had stopped looking at him as a strange being, much less showing any sign of fear. But that woman was now screaming in horror.

"Shut up..." I told her. "Shut up already, you fucking mother..." But she stared toward the door, still screaming hysterically, even though Homero had already run away. The expression on her face as I buttoned my pants overlapped the black woman's face, engulfed in the horror she thought she'd seen. Gonçalvez grabbed her by the waist and placed a hand over her mouth, threatening her if she didn't shut up. But her fear was beyond her; it dominated her. Then her eyes darted from one to the other, and suddenly, and for a moment, lucid, she bit his hand. When Gonçalvez pulled it away and the blood was visible, she went to wash it, and she started screaming again, louder this time.

I grabbed her by the shoulders and threw her to the floor. I began to hit her face furiously, because I couldn't allow her to continue screaming. I couldn't let her get us into a situation that would jeopardize our journey. Above all, that would separate me from Homer.

"Shut up..." I repeated over and over again. "Shut up." Her voice trailed off as it sank behind her swollen lips and broken teeth. But she gave another shriek from some part of her wounded throat, and it was then that I felt everything I had tried to rescue from my civilized world crash down on me. And when I found myself alone forever, without the object of my love, without that other half that Homer represented, my clenched hands pounded again, until the woman's skull became a splintered vessel on the floor.

Without rising, with my knees on either side of her body, my right hand full ofDripping with blood and still trembling, I looked toward the door.

Lisandro Gonçalvez had gone out and come back in. He was clutching a bag with his bitten hand.

"I'm leaving," he told me. I remained impassive, simply not knowing what step to take first. My body and I were two separate entities, until he grabbed me by the arm and pushed me.

"Get out of here, quickly!"

It was only when I smelled the rotten smell emanating from him—not just from the bag he was now dragging—and saw the stony face I had also seen at the house in Bom Jesus that my consciousness sank into reality like a bottomless pit, without limits or exits, because it was a great void. I entered the room, and the bartender saw me and said in Spanish:

"Is your friend still with the black woman?"

I stopped, I think surprised to hear him speak Spanish, but I'm not even sure if I was or if my mind was on a plane where the obvious was overlooked, and consciousness understood everything, absolutely, without needing translation. My world was the instant, nothing more than the few square meters that surrounded me, and each step was a different, irretrievable death and beginning.

I said yes, I guess, and the guy looked toward the door.

"As long as you pay well, it doesn't matter what you do with the black woman. But don't bring me that little monster anymore, he scares me off, like I just got married." Because the black woman didn't scream like that just because she was fucked, right?

I listened, I was a witness and accomplice to that time in that space. I knew that with a single step, all of that would disappear forever: the bar, the bathroom, the woman, the night. I resumed my steps toward the front door and put a hand to my face. I smelled the scent that protected me, the same one emanating from Gonçalvez's bag. It was a protective aroma, like a light shield that was slowly fading into oblivion.

I entered the hotel. The concierge wasn't there; he was probably sleeping in the room next to the reception desk. I went up to the room, where Homero was sitting on the edge of the bed. He had something in his hands, which he seemed to be playing with, something that was reflecting on the ceiling. It was the small bathroom mirror; he had ripped it off, and when I thought he was going to cut himself, I ran over and roughly snatched it away from him. He fell to the floor, and I fell beside him. The mirror was intact.

"He was looking at me," he said. "Because he's so small, I only see his face, or whatever part of his body I choose. That's reality, just fragments of things and times. Disjointed images that a man spends his life trying to piece together." Knowing the futility, deceiving himself with the fantasy he thinks he understands.

He began to cry against the wall, curled up like a fetus. When I tried to touch him, he rejected me. So I ripped the blanket off the bed, wrapped it around him, and carried him in my arms. I went down the stairs and went out to the street. It must have been three in the morning, and there wasn't even a taxi. I started walking as fast as I could toward what I assumed was the train station. Homer was agitated, and I had to stop several times.

"I need you to walk, we still have a long way to go."

He nodded, and without removing the blanket, he walked beside me, without holding my hand. It was many blocks. It was already dawn, and we were both exhausted. The traffic was getting worse in the streets, but all I could see was the massive building of the São Paulo train station.

We sat down in the waiting room. I looked at the schedule. A train was leaving for Brasília in forty-five minutes. I went to get the tickets and passed by a coffee stand. Homero drank the coffee eagerly, but refused the cookies. They were his favorite.

"Do you want to tell me something about what you saw?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"But I'll get used to it, as Gonçalvez says."

An hour later, we were sitting in a train car headed for Brasília. We remained silent, and as the day wore on, the light began to bring forth the fantasies of reality that passed by us in the form of landscapes, paintings, fragments that would soon be dry and smelly, like in Dr. Ruiz's anatomy museum.

12

Homero didn't want to eat anything. The train was packed with people, and those who were standing occasionally sat down in the aisle. I got up and went two or three times to get drinks and sandwiches in the dining car. When I returned, I always found some curious person watching my son, sometimes looking at him, other times ignoring him, but always silent. The second time this happened, it was a boy no older than Homer, and I think he was asking him something, but I couldn't make out what as he approached me. I managed to see his disdainful smile. He was leaning over the seatback, touching Homer's head when I reached out and grabbed his wrist. The boy was scared and tried to resist. Some passengers were staring at us. "Stop bothering him," I said, not caring that he didn't understand my Spanish. My gaze was smug. Inefficient. The boy ran off when I let go, and disappeared into some seat near the end of the car. I sat down and asked Homer if he was okay. He didn't answer.

It was after noon. The train rattled and the sun shining through the window shone directly on our faces. I closed my eyes and listened to sounds: the footsteps of people walking down the aisle, the conversations between passengers in the neighboring seats, and a few street vendors passing by from time to time. The train stopped at a station, and without opening my eyes, I began to imagine the movements inside the car in a game that distracted me from the many thoughts that threatened from the doors of my memory. If I gave in to them, I was sure I wouldn't have a chance to continue. And that game of the imagination was like entering the realms of an alternative interpretation of reality. What the mind perceives through sounds is very different from what the eyes offer; time is distorted, anxiety turns into waiting, and silence takes on the most transcendent value. The pauses in silence are moving, chilling. At first, it's fear, then tranquility arrives, because in those spaces where seemingly nothing happens, we realize that the world that doesn't concern us is far away, and we are an isolated cell traveling in the bloodstream of a humanity that creates and destroys its own fragments without guilt or remorse. The train we were traveling on was the torrential flow of blood on the tracks of time and memory.

I heard someone open the window, and the sound of the forest penetrated the car. The scent of the trees was intense, along with the whinnying of horses riding along the tracks, the sound of wagon wheels on the stones, the shouts of people coming and going from the farmland. The sound of the wind through the trees mingled with the clatter of the train, and a breeze came in and touched my face. Then I opened my eyes with a kind of peaceful smile, hoping to see the sun behind the tall trees that undoubtedly formed a canopy of shade over the tracks.

The first vestiges of the Amazon, not the full jungle, of course, just the surroundings, devastated by the advance of civilization, but still intense, persistent in its unwavering tenacity, always ready to advance despite every weakness of the city dweller. I heard the engines of cranes and trucks, the shouts of workers bringing bricks and cement, poles, shovels and diggers, and electric saws. And I even thought I heard the splitting of wood and the falling of trees.

But when I opened my eyes, I saw only a man sitting in front of me. It wasn't the same passenger as when I closed my eyes. It must have been one of those who got on at the previous station. He was looking at me, and I realized he wasn't blinking. He was young, thin, with very pale skin, and he was wearing a very thin white shirt, the buttons open halfway down his chest. Somehow, he looked familiar.

I looked around, but nothing else had changed. The window next to Homer was closed, and the reflected sunlight left me with only shadows flashing by. I looked back at the man and noticed he'd also turned his head toward the window. And the instant he turned to look at me again, I saw the mark on his neck. A scar still reddened. Then the man stood up and walked down the aisle. I turned to watch him; he walked slowly, and no one else paid attention to him. Several passengers were standing, but no one came forward to take the empty seat.

I knew who it was.

I walked over to Homer, who was sleeping with his head against the window, put an arm around his shoulders, and leaned him over me. I felt him breathing, restless; his hands were restless, his fingers clenching and unclenching from time to time. I stroked his head, and his curly hair transmitted a kind of electricity that seemed to spread throughout the entire car.

Suddenly, to my left, the man reappeared. He sat down, staring at me. The three of us seemed to be alone. His hands were on his thighs, hands well-groomed and slender, the same as the fabric of his pants. I noticed his shirt was looser, with one or two more buttons undone. The skin on his chest was white, but lower down, near his abdomen, I could see the beginning of an abyss.

The man continued to stare at me expressionlessly, and I couldn't tear my gaze away from him. There was nothing left to say, only my eyes speaking, and the lump in my throat that choked me without killing me. I clung to Homer as if he were my excuse and my salvation, because I felt the hanged

man making his appearance like a messenger. The clatter of the train became slower, less mechanical and softer, more primitive. I even thought I could hear the noise again. Or the wagons next to the train, but this time it was the train itself, an immense wagon carrying hundreds of silent passengers, sitting resignedly and staring into space with their eyes open.

He got up again and walked down the aisle again. I murmured something, I think a "no," like a plea, but if he heard me, he ignored me. He came back soon, and this time he was carrying a folded newspaper under one arm. He sat down, unfolded the newspaper, and began to read. His face was hidden, and all I could see was the headlines on the front page. It was an Argentine newspaper, or at least it was written in Spanish, and in large red letters the word "War" exploded. The beginning of the conflagration between Argentina and Brazil had been declared. I leaned forward to read better, but I thought I heard the voice of that man reading aloud, on the other side of the page, while I thought I was reading on my own. My inner voice was like the voice of the hanged man.

The de facto Argentine president had declared war on Brazil in response to the latter's support for Uruguay in the long conflict over its political restoration, which had led to coups in both countries. President Oribe had blockaded the port of Buenos Aires for two months, supported by the Brazilian government. Now President Livingston had formally declared war on both countries. His press spokesperson, also chief of staff and wife of the dictator, Samanta Bernárdez, had been the mastermind behind the foreign policy. Meanwhile, in Brazil, a revolutionary movement of indigenous tribes had risen, attacking several cities in recent days. The Emperor of Brazil had mobilized part of the Brazilian armed forces to the Argentine border, at the same time that a state of siege was declared throughout the country.

The man lowered the newspaper and folded it again. He looked toward the window, which suddenly shattered, and arrows flew in one after another, along with the screams of men climbing over the sides of the car and onto the roof. The glare of the sun blinded me, and all I could make out were the dark-skinned arms thrusting through the window. Several faces pierced through the dust, the faces of primitive men, of savage indigenous people who still used spears. The passengers crouched in their seats, hands on their heads, crying hysterically. Some got up and ran down the aisle, and were soon hit by arrows. The train continued moving, even faster, and some indigenous people fell from the roof onto the sides of the track. I managed to pull Homer from his seat and crouched on the aisle floor. The windows were broken, but too thick for them to get in without hurting themselves. I saw the body of one hanging from the top edge of the window, his feet hitting the remaining undamaged glass. When he managed to get in, he jumped onto the seat and took a quick look around the car. Seeing Homer, he pointed at him with an orderly gesture, said something with an unintelligible shout, and threw himself at us.

And while I could do nothing but cover my son with my body, thinking that our entire journey had come to an end, I saw the shadow of the hanged man rise from his seat with absurd calmness and place a hand on the other

man's back. The Indian stopped, his bloodstained hands no longer exerting pressure on my back, and when he raised his head, I saw him look to the sides as if he couldn't see who was touching him. He remained still, sitting on the floor with his back against a seat, his eyes closed.

Several others tried to get in, but the speed of the train on a curve caused many to lose their balance and fall. The attack had stopped; the passengers continued to cry and scream. There was blood everywhere, spears and arrows stuck in the seats, broken glass, and the car filled with dust and tree leaves that the train brushed against in its fast, dizzying motion. I feared we were going to derail.

The man in the white shirt and the scar on his neck walked past us and walked down the aisle toward another car.

I knew who he was.

But I didn't even dare look at his back anymore. I leaned my face against Homer's, drying my eyes with his warm hair, that body I would have liked to be buried next to if we had died at that moment. I cried in despair, and then my son hugged me, also trembling. Maybe he forgave me for what he had seen in São Paulo, I don't know, or maybe he understood that the world was changing too fast. Somehow he belonged to a world that wasn't extinct as we thought, and mine was beginning to crumble, or be conquered.

The dust of the jungle we were crossing allowed us to hide fromThe rest of the world, at least for a brief moment of that afternoon, during which time sank into a peculiar oblivion of its progress, and something resembling mercy or pity had momentarily overcome its stubborn obsession.

13

When we arrived at the Brasília terminal, the train had to enter the platforms very slowly. The tracks were covered with the bodies of Indians, which the gendarmes were removing one by one to the sides. Later, some bulldozers would drag them to several piles near the city.

Homero served as my interpreter, although I had grown accustomed to the language. We disembarked among hundreds of people until we filled the platforms, but our pace was slowed by the corpses we were dodging as we tried to leave the station. All the bodies were naked, all dead from bullet wounds. Homero was paying attention to the conversations, and he'd heard that what was most surprising about the attacks was that the Indians didn't use firearms. I asked him if he'd heard the reason. I didn't know. A man near us said something I didn't understand, and I pointed out my son. When I saw him, I saw his expression of fearful respect, the same one we'd seen since we got off the train. Homero had stopped attracting attention after the attack, and especially upon arriving at that extermination camp that was the Brasília station.

"You can talk to him," I told the man. And then Homero asked him in Portuguese. The other man answered, and when he finished speaking, I think nothing existed for him except that little ape holding hands with a man, who was able to talk.

"He says the Indians have refused to use weapons since the attacks began, several days ago. They've even said on television that arms dealers offered them business deals and they refused."

I noticed Homer looking at the bodies. His expression still held the fear he'd felt when the Indians' hands had tried to grab him. Now he looked at them with intense curiosity, as if contemplating endangered specimens.

When we reached the station doors, the city streets were also filled with military trucks, people wandering around, lost, looking for transportation. There were no more bodies in the streets; they were being lifted by trucks from the piles where they had been accumulated. The afternoon was fading, and gloom invaded the sky, covering the buildings with a plaintive, damp tone.

We walked because there was no other option; all public transportation was canceled. We went into the center, looking for a hotel or boarding house, but they were all closed. On the corners, there were soldiers wearing helmets and dark glasses, with guns ready to fire. In several places, they asked me for identification when they saw me walk by with Homer. Only the medical certificate confirming his illness served as safe passage, but since we were Argentines, they checked our documents twice before letting us continue. I watched the soldiers' grim expressions, their hands touching Homero like a zoo animal. Sometimes they spoke to each other, so quietly that my son couldn't hear what they were saying. Other times they laughed openly, or their lips formed a smile that revealed more fear than sarcasm.

"We're going to the Institute of Anthropological Research," I told them, and through my dark glasses I could see the expression in their eyes. Homero translated for them, if necessary, but I think they understood perfectly. Then they gave me back my documents and let us continue, walking, of course, to who knew where.

Some told us to continue northwest of the city, where the administrative center of Brasília was. It was already late at night. We were tired and hungry, but I didn't trust anyone. We sat on the sidewalk, leaning against the wall of an abandoned house. Some cats fled, howling in terror. Homer got up to urinate, then sat back down and curled up next to me. I was dozing, but I felt his eyes not closing, contemplating the darkness that surrounded us, interrupted only by the dim lights of that old, poor neighborhood on the outskirts of one of the newest and most overcrowded cities in the world. I sensed his trembling at the threats that surrounded him. Men feared him because they saw in him the cause of what had begun to happen: the attack of the jungle that surrounded the cities of Brazil. And above all, the arrival of that same jungle that seemed to be advancing to come and find him, to take him back, even though he had never been there. A return implies recognition.

I woke up being lifted by the arm and pushed to stumble forward. The sun was blinding me because it was shining directly into my face. I knew what was happening by the voices of the soldiers, forts and empiresI tried to stop to explain, but they pushed me, and I fell to the ground. Homer was screaming, almost in a shriek, as if he were pretending to be an animal. The soldiers were laughing at him, forming a circle around him, hitting him with the butts of their rifles. I didn't know at first why he was dissembling like that, if just saying a word would have ended this circus charade, but then I saw, amid the reflection of the sun in my still-bruised eyes, that fury I had seen in the hotel in Sao Paulo. It was as if he was telling them: if this is what I look like, this is what I am, and in this way he accepted all the consequences.

But I wasn't going to let him do it, I wasn't going to abandon him. I tried to get up, but two of them stepped on me with their boots. I tried to take the documents out of my pocket, but my hands were handcuffed. I shouted in rudimentary Portuguese that the papers were in my pocket. They ignored me, and one of them began hitting me in the face until I lost consciousness. A second before, I heard Homero, threatened by five soldiers and about to be caught, shouting:

"Dad!"

I woke up again in a police station. My hands were handcuffed in front of me, sitting in a chair and leaning on a desk. Homero was beside me, with his long right arm on my shoulders. I opened my eyes and, without raising my head, watched the looks of the police officers and the people who passed by us, still busy, but fascinated by the scene we made. A policeman approached us, said something in broken Portuguese, and my son responded.

The other one sat down and began talking to him. Homero then told me that we had been arrested for vagrancy, and that we had no papers on us; perhaps they had been stolen during the night. We were foreigners and from an enemy nation, therefore we should remain prisoners. I made a gesture of weariness and sarcasm. We weren't in a Hitlerian state, I told them. The policeman looked at me and said:

"Worse..."

I asked them to at least untie me. They could check our background online, of course. I was a literature teacher, and I took my son to Dr. Levi's high school.

"We already did, Professor. Everything has been corroborated." He spoke perfect Spanish now. "But I can't leave them on the streets. They'll stay in prison waiting to be extradited."

I thought of Buenos Aires, and I remembered Samanta and her current political situation. We couldn't go back.

"Please," I said. "Let my son go to high school, at least." Homer looked at me, but I ignored him. The policeman said he would speak to a social worker.

We spent the whole day there. They fed us in a room that looked like an interrogation room, but at least it wasn't a dungeon cell.

"Are you going to leave me in this country?" Homer asked.

"It's better for you to stay alone than return to Argentina. You know, your mother could make our lives miserable now that she's in that government position. And no doubt all the extraditions will go through her office at some point."

"But she doesn't want anything to do with me. She even denied I was ever born..."

"That's why, Homero, and even less so now that her life is on public display."

I didn't need to say anything else for him to understand the full consequences of our return. Many more possibilities must have gone through his head than I could have imagined; his methodical, chess-like mind drew all the necessary knowledge to keep our daily conversations short. Just the disquisitions on literature and philosophy kept us talking for hours, and that afternoon, at the police station, while we awaited what we would melodramatically call our fate, he began to talk about his reading of Husserl when we were in Montevideo. I knew he was mentioning it now because Levi applied experimental psychology in his books, and surely did so at his institution as well.

"Do you think mental regression exists?" he asked me.

"Are you talking about individuals or the collective psychology of humanity?"

"Whatever you want. I don't believe that each person is a part of a great universal brain, but that each person has the entire universe in their brain. What is, by law, is true? Am I this body, and therefore am I an ape? The body is our fundamental phenomenon, our noumenon. We can only emerge from it by exploring with language, and from there, the multiple possibilities. But can we deduce that the disquisitions of reason are as true as the body that possesses us?"

"You're asking whether we are the result of our psyche or our body," I told him.

I looked at the ceilings and the white, peeling walls, the table empty of enigmas in the middle of that room resembling a hollow skull. And a tribal image suddenly came to us: a naked Indian sitting on the mud, working painstakingly on a human head, skinning it first. Or, opening the eye sockets, emptying the brain through the oral cavity, approaching the weak base of the skull with delicate instruments until it breaks.

"Think about dreams. Fallacies, fantasies? We are what we dream while we dream, and we are the bodies that sleep while we dream. I watch you sleep, Homer, and I could pick you up in my arms and carry you from one place to another, but you are elsewhere, in a hundred places at once, and I can't help it. Would you deny me the pleasure or anguish of your body, or your mind, if that's what you want to call that experience, during sleep? The same thing happens with thought, and the same with artistic creations. They are almost always unreliable samples of those other worlds we inhabit."

"But our body, Papa, is an anchor. Without this body, we could inhabit those worlds simultaneously."

"That's Platonism, Homer." The anguish your body generates is also a characteristic of your personality. Sometimes it can save you from hatred, rarely from remorse, and never from frustration. And this frustration, which is also your being, can also lead you to longing and ecstasy.

Night must have been falling over Brasilia, but we continued talking, perhaps being overheard by someone through a hidden audio device. But that someone must have fallen asleep too.

A woman entered the room, interrupting what Homer was about to answer. She was a Black social worker, and I immediately remembered the woman I had killed. She was so similar, beyond her race, that a lump of anguish formed in my throat. I thought that all of this was a dream I had told my son about: that night in São Paulo, the attack on the train, the presence of that man who so resembled Farías. And if I went back in time, even the birth of my son was an event I could have wished had been nothing more than a nightmare. Then Homer touched my arm. Staring at his hairy hand, knowing that my tears betrayed me, both my sorrow and my remorse, I forced myself to look up at the woman. With every word she spoke, I remembered every gesture and movement of those hands, with my elbows resting on the table, I remembered the ecstasy and the fury. Until I had before me the horrified gaze of the prostitute in the Sao Paulo bathroom, and that face was now superimposed on the face of the social worker.

She noticed the change in my expression. Distrustful, thinking that perhaps I wasn't as harmless as she'd been told, she asked if I felt okay.

I hid my head in my arms. I knew I was trembling, but I had to say what I was about to say.

"I…" and Homer interrupted me, like in a Chekhov play, with the same trace of sadness in his voice, with the same self-denial.

"My dad is very tired," he said. And the woman gave him a slight, understanding smile, admiring my son's mettle more than the weak inconsistency of my soul.

They took us in a patrol car to a hotel. We drove through the streets after dark, listening to ambulance sirens in the distance, car lights blinding us, and the silhouettes of men or women banging on the car as we drove by.

They were mostly homeless, and I even thought I saw the figures of some Indians who quickly disappeared. And in a fleeting moment, at my side of the window, a monkey appeared, upright and gesticulating fearfully, scraping the glass with its fingers. I had the reflex to look to my other side, to confirm that my son was still there. But immediately the figure disappeared. I told myself it must be the shadows and moving lights of those streets that had inspired me. I heard the officers transporting us whispering among themselves, even reporting on the radio. Neither Homer nor I understood what they were saying.

Finally, we arrived at the hotel, an old hotel with a double-leaf entrance and a long staircase leading to the only floor. One of the police officers escorted us and spoke to the receptionist, a grim-looking man, short and scrawny, but with a hooked nose and curly hair like a black man's. He looked at Homer and me with disdain. They argued for a while about who should show us to our room, until the police officer left and the man told us to follow him. The long hallway was dark, smelling damp and making noises like rats eating wood. He opened the door to the room and let us in. He locked it. I didn't have the desire or the strength to protest. Homer threw himself down on the bed and fell asleep immediately. I went to the bathroom, swarming with flies on the remains of fecal matter at the bottom of the toilet. I pressed the flush button and with difficulty opened the small window at the top of the shower wall. I urinated, holding my breath so as not to inhale the nauseating aroma until enough water flowed. ent of water. There was a towel that looked clean, but when I touched it, it was hard with dried semen. I took off my shirt and dried myself with the T-shirt that was ready to be thrown in the trash. I lay down next to Homer, and looking at the maps of damp stains on the ceiling, I fell asleep while thinking that maybe we had already finished our journey, and this city—this hotel, this room—was the final destination of our life together.

14

In the morning, I woke up as soon as dawn broke. The street outside the hotel was quiet; a few men were walking to work, I guess. The schools were closed due to the state of siege. Few women were out sweeping the sidewalks of the surrounding businesses. Two or three patrol cars and a truck with soldiers passed by, their full weight impacting the ancient cobblestones. This neighborhood must have been a settlement older than the city itself. From the first floor where we were staying, I could see to the left, going up the street, the clear sky that was beginning to reveal the modern and sophisticated buildings that characterized Brasília.

A car stopped in front of the door. The social worker got out and entered the hotel. A minute later, I heard the lock click, and she said good morning. She looked around the room with a familiar expression.

"I'm sorry you had to spend the night here." Her Spanish was perfect.

"Why didn't you tell me you spoke my language?"

She smiled.

"I usually talk to juvenile delinquents; I don't speak much Spanish, and besides, I didn't know who you were yet."

"And now you know?"

"We're at war with your country, Professor, but yes, we've found out about you and your family, and your mother..." She looked at Homer to make sure he was still asleep. "We should wake him up. I'll take you out for breakfast before we leave."

I thought her words referred to the extradition, but I should have known that if she knew about Samanta and my bank account, she'd probably lean toward the latter.

"Where?"

"To Dr. Levi's institute, of course. Isn't that where you were headed?"

"And to whom do I owe the favor, and how much?"

Without answering, she approached Homero and gently shook his shoulders. I suddenly realized she was a very beautiful woman, with well-formed features and a tall, lanky body that moved gently and delicately. The hand that touched Homero had slender fingers and slightly long, barely feminine nails. I no longer saw in her the prostitute from Sao Paulo, but Lucía, in a very different body, but with the same confidence and delicate slenderness of her movements. She looked up and looked at me with those large, dark eyes, and her full lips smiled at me.

"What a beautiful boy you have," she said. "It's no surprise that Dr. Levi is interested in having you at his center. He's a man who has brought prestige to our country with his decision to choose Brasilia for his main research projects."

That was the answer I was waiting for. It wasn't the prestige, but the money. Levi and his knowledge, Levi and his connection to the American government. The Emperor of Brazil was already an antiquated institution, an old vestige of the Portuguese colony that still lingered as a facade. It wasn't just Latin American, this new war.

My son woke up, and she took him to the bathroom in another, cleaner room. When she came back, she gave me a bag with a couple of new shirts.

"You can shower in the next room; you'll find clean towels; I brought them. We have an hour to have breakfast and leave. We'll wait for him in the car."

"No, no, let's go as I am..."

She noticed my distrust.

"Okay, Professor, I won't separate you from your son for a minute if you don't want me to."

Homer and I went into the next room, and I locked the door. They probably had a copy, but I had no choice but to trust them from that point on. I took

a quick shower without taking my eyes off Homer, who was waiting, sitting on the toilet lid. Then we left and got in the car. Two blocks later, we stopped at a cafeteria.

"What day is it today?" I'd already lost track of time.

"Tuesday, Professor. October 1st."

She showed me the day's official newspaper, the only one published now since the state of siege had abolished private media. The headlines announced the conflicts in Paraguayan territory, which until then had tried to remain neutral.

"These events will convince General López to join us. Argentina will be left alone," I said, actually thinking out loud. There, we were a past soon to be abolished; here, we were a bank account.

She said nothing.

-What is your name?

Her eyes literally lit up when she heard me. Her mouth opened like an entrance to a distant world of luminous jungles, of copious trees and shadowy trunks, of the smell of sap and green stems, of intense heat andStrange sounds, of animals, insects, torrential waters.

-Ephigenia.

There were shots fired in the street, but no one in the cafeteria paid attention to them after the first few minutes, when someone got up to look through the windows. Soldiers rushed by, running or in military trucks, following the hordes of natives who resumed their attacks after a few hours. They never seemed to end, even though each attack ended with their almost complete extermination. At least that's what was said on the streets and in the newspaper that day.

And in the rumble of the shots, Homer began to speak, still holding the cup of coffee with milk in one hand, and the other holding the small spoon, which he slowly lowered toward the saucer as he recited. Because he was saying something that was undoubtedly verse, but in a language I didn't recognize at first. Her recitation lasted no more than two minutes, and when she stopped, I realized she'd spoken in Greek. I recognized Iphigenia's name in the verses. I asked her, afraid of making a mistake.

"Euripides, Papa. Iphigenia in Tauris. The sacrificial scene."

She looked at him, entranced. I shouldn't ask anything; anything I said would sound like the most trivial thing in the world. Then I saw in her eyes something she'd tried to hide behind that governmental complacency. Something innocent and ancient, yet bestial and irresistible at the same time. Iphigenia read all this in my eyes, and with her own eyes, she answered me that not yet, that there was still time, that this wasn't the last time we would see each other.

A short while later, we got in the car and headed toward the administrative center. The streets were wide, but lined with recently improvised shanties,

buildings of economical designs that contrasted with the already mythical architecture imagined by Niemeyer in the classic buildings that still persisted, far removed from the austere science-fiction landscape when the city was built and founded. A large number of constructions had been added that evidently sought to continue the original architectural style, but secondhand influences, especially North American, were noticeable in some; in others, the buildings had no more than commercial purposes, headquarters of international companies or apartment buildings imitating the architecture of Chicago or New York. To some extent, passing by these constructions and their many traces, I thought of Las Vegas, but here the pastiche wasn't deliberate, nor could it be called kitsch, but rather the result of poor urban planning measures typical of countries as unstable as ours have always been. The still recent return to the republican monarchy system was nothing more than an excuse to somehow stabilize and legalize the disastrous, now irreversible, economic policy. Brasília was now a city as enormous as Rio de Janeiro, even surpassing it in population. It was home to the Emperor, a representative of the old Bourbon family, along with the entire representative regime and its institutions: the Senate, the Chamber of Deputies, and the Prime Minister.

Efigenia told me, while driving, that the Emperor was the one who really made the political decisions, and that he was much smarter than the Prime Minister. Unlike in other eras, republican institutions were nothing more than a kind of facade that maintained the image of democracy that international relations required in most cases. I refrained from asking her if she agreed; it was clear that as a state employee, she wouldn't answer me truthfully.

Homer looked out the open window, amazed at the buildings we passed, with their mixture of tinsel redolent of ancient royalty, like the palaces that housed the various ministries, or the exorbitant poverty of the tall apartment buildings designed as simple, old one-bedroom apartments for the working class, with multiple floors and barred windows that looked more like prisons.

Several blocks away, she pointed out a building that could be seen towering over the houses and businesses in the neighborhood we were passing through. At first, all we could see was a single large terrace with enormous gardens that seemed to descend in an inverted fashion. I didn't understand the perspective until we finally arrived. It was a large inverted pyramid, with enormous gardens hanging from the different floors, shadowed by the upper floors, which descended in scale until they reached the narrow base occupied only by the entrance door. As we approached in the car, I looked out the window, curious and amazed, wondering how such balance was maintained, until the car then passed between almost transparent columns, which couldn't be seen from a distance.

Efigenia laughed at me.

"It's the design of aA student of Niemeyer, they say he was the only one worthy of his school; others say it's a horrible imitation of the Gardens of Babylon.

I nodded, dumbfounded. She maneuvered between the columns, which she said were made of transparent steel. They finally achieved, I told myself, thinking of the novels of Jules Verne, the once utopian alloy that would revolutionize the history of industry. Now I could see the reflections of the sun on those impressively tall columns, against whose structure the car would be a mere piece of sheet metal if it were to crash into them. In any case, the car's sensors went off every time we passed too close, and then Efigenia parked.

We got out and followed her toward the steel doors, which opened when she placed her hand on the stone wall. The entire building was a mixture of steel and stone, no concrete or cement, just plenty of glass in the windows, which stretched out and continued as we raised our gaze, until our heads could no longer turn and we had to turn around to continue observing the successive steps, where the plants and trees formed not just gardens, but jungles that peered into the abyss, this time, of the concrete with which the city's floor was covered. Everything seemed to want to escape, and hundreds of exotic flowers and leaves lined the balconies, like weeping willows at the edge of a sea of pavement. Lamenting, trying to escape, feeding off the sun and shade of that building, which was a kind of great, restless jungle, because we had already begun to hear the sounds that gradually clouded and overpowered the noises of the city.

There was a single elevator occupying the entire narrow entrance. The apex of the inverted pyramid was precisely that: a vertex supported—no longer even buried, as one might expect from the laws of architecture—on the ground. If the columns weren't evident, despite their informal transparency, it would be easy to imagine that one of the pyramids of Egypt and Mexico had been transported and placed upside down on that site in Brasilia. Or perhaps it was simply a pyramid discovered in the Amazon rainforest, where, as has been said so often, there are still impenetrable places. As if the jungle weren't just a vast expanse of a single surface, but rather various superimposed planes, perhaps covered and dominated by successive generations of devouring and merciless vegetation.

As we ascended, the elevator gently slowed down, changed direction, and resumed its upward path. Efigenia explained to me that these stops were stops on the various floors, where new elevators multiplied toward the four sides of the building. "Also, each floor has several parallel vehicles that take you from one level to the next, individually. Dr. Levi's offices are on the terrace. We'll be there soon."

We went from one elevator to another, and on each level I could see the windows that opened onto the city, which was slowly being hidden by the smog and fog. The building's vegetation overflowed the balconies, as could already be seen from the outside, but from inside, that same jungle was dazzling in its color and harmonious layout with the building's architecture.

"Who built it?" I asked her.

She looked at me ironically.

"An Argentine..." and laughed. "Don't tell me you didn't know. I thought Argentines are too pedantic not to know, or maybe that's why they take on that attitude of aristocratic ignorance."

I didn't answer; she condescended to say it was a joke.

"Walter Márquez."

I knew him; he had designed several government buildings in La Plata, as well as tourist attractions and private mansions in many provinces. But I wasn't familiar with this particular building we were in.

"They say he had many unfinished designs, many from the time he studied here with Niemeyer. The architects revived the project when Márquez died."

Homero paused at each step we took to continue ascending. The dark green vegetation and red and turquoise flowers caught his attention, but above all, the birdsong that practically overwhelmed us every time the elevator doors opened and we walked near the balconies toward the next floor. Almost at the top, or at the base of the pyramid, there were no elevators, only long ramps with wide steps that spiraled upward to the terrace. Then the door opened and we were blinded by sunlight.

When our eyes adjusted, we saw what was only a small section of that entire floor, where Dr. Levi's office was. I realized we weren't outside, even though the light was dazzling. That whole place, at least the one Efigenia called administrative, was just another floor, but covered by the sameThe transparent material of the columns. The furniture was spaced far apart, and people moved around, opening doors that seemed nonexistent. Some of them, made of wood, even resembled tree trunks that rose beyond the ceiling, in gaps cut into the transparent steel.

A man in a white suit and black shirt approached us. He spoke to Efigenia with great affability, but with shy respect. He was almost elderly, also black, thin, and with a sparse, poorly trimmed beard. They spoke in Portuguese, occasionally glancing at Homero and me. My son shrugged; it seemed they were only discussing routine administrative procedures. Then she introduced us. He was Dr. Levi's personal secretary. He said he would see us as an exception to his busy schedule. He was leaving for North America next week for training for his appointment as a scientific advisor on a trip to the moon. He had recently heard about Homero. I looked at Efigenia, questioning her. Many of the questions I'd been asking myself since our arrival in Brazilian territory, and especially as we approached the north, now crowded my eyes: why the curiosity and fear Homer's appearance had provoked had transformed into a kind of indifference at times, and then into fearful respect when we had finally reached the city after the attacks began.

We sat in wide armchairs in front of a large low table, on a rug with floral prints from an indigenous tapestry. We were offered cool drinks. The sun was intense but not hot. I drank my coffee, which I preferred to the exotic fruit juices the old man brought us. When he left us alone, I asked Efigenia:

"How did Dr. Levi find out about Homer?"

"Darling," she said, caressing my bare forearm. I was wearing one of the T-shirts she had brought me. "As soon as they told me at the police station about your son, I immediately contacted Fandiño, Levi's secretary. I knew he was about to leave on a trip, but I also knew that meeting Homero would be a priority for him.

I didn't ask why; I already knew. I had read some of his books, but that whole building, that kind of architectural jungle, dazzled me, seduced me, and frightened me. Just like Efigenia."

15

When old Fandiño returned, he said that Dr. Levi would be busy in the lab all day, but he had sent word that we were his guests, of course, and that Homero had his place at the institute from that moment on. Without giving us time to answer or ask anything, he signaled us to follow him. Efigenia and Homero took the first steps behind him, but I stayed still. They turned to look at me, and she seemed to understand.

"Fandiño, the professor has been through some very bad experiences, and I think he's suspicious. Maybe we should give him time..."

The old man nodded, covered his mouth before coughing harshly, and then said:

"Of course. What would you like to ask, professor?"

They were looking at me with a kind of sarcasm, it seemed to me, like a child being mocked and taken seriously. What could I ask, I told myself, in that place where everything seemed to be in its place, even questions seemed unnecessary because the answers had already been answered long ago. Every aspect of that building provoked questions that were ridiculously obvious, and yet I, like a deaf person, didn't hear them, or if I did, my mind still couldn't grasp the scope of those answers.

"What place is this?" I could only say.

The old man revealed a look of human understanding for the first time.

"The place where your son will find his peers," he said.

I don't think I needed more than that to follow him. A weight had suddenly disappeared, and an enormous tiredness took hold of me, and I had to grab Efigenia's hand with my left hand, and Homer's with the other. She felt what was happening to me, and those black eyes in her dark, olive-tinged complexion gave me the relief I longed for. I longed to be in bed next to her, to feel her hands and the warmth of her hair on my body. Not to think about the next place we had to go. Not to think about the cities we'd left behind or the people who were gradually disappearing from our lives. Just

to feel the breeze through the tall trees, the tops rustling above my bed, hearing the sounds of the jungle and the river water thundering far away.

Fandiño led us back to the elevators, this time to go back down, but we stopped two or three floors below. The door opened onto what seemed to be another terrace, and the feeling of disorientation once again disturbed me. Above was the sky, and so I thought we had returned to the terrace. We walked along paths of limestone earth that gradually turned reddish as we walked. The bushes on either side were transforming into trees with broad, long leaves. The chirping was deafening at times, and the damp smell began to make me sweat. Homero had let go of my hand when I tried to wipe the sweat from my forehead, and I called after him when I saw him moving away between the trunks. Efigenia grabbed my elbow, telling me not to worry. Fandiño stood next to me, and between them they held my arms, without forcing me, like an old man who was suddenly about to faint.

"I'm fine now," I told them a while later, thinking we were approaching the balconies. I longed to see the city from that height, but we continued walking for about half an hour. The building was larger than I had imagined, or we were simply going around in circles in that jungle setting set up in the middle of the city.

But then I heard Homero's voice, calling me. She was clear, more mature than ever, yet there was something in her timbre that seemed strange to me, and I soon remembered that I had sometimes heard that kind of complaint, for example when she was scared, or when she was crying. Moments when her dazzling intelligence sank into an atrocious, wounded, animal wail. But since this time I couldn't see her, only her tone reached me, and I was able to isolate in that call a kind of extreme, wounded wisdom. I ran toward the source of her voice. The plants formed a path I had to make my way through. They hurt me, ripping my shirt, making cuts in my pants, while I heard Efigenia's voice calling my name with her now-recovered Portuguese accent, and it was as if I were being called from another continent, across the ocean.

Then I came to a clearing, in the center of which stood Homer, and suddenly I realized that maybe it wasn't him. Because there were almost ten apes accompanying him, upright, even taller, perhaps adults. They stood still, in an imperfect circle where each one could observe the others in turn and simultaneously, but most of the gaze fell on the youngest. My son had his back to me, turning his head from side to side, watching the others, more astonished than they were, more frightened. I felt his fear, because it was the same fear I felt. What should I do? I asked myself. Go rescue him? Rescue him from what? They were monkeys, I told myself, who watched him because they found him similar. But their posture was that of humans, even though their physical structure was different. What was different about them? I asked myself, when the question should have referred to similarities.

My son was a human being suffering from an illness. The others were monkeys. If they were all similar, even as similar as I resembled old

Fandiño himself, then those beings contemplating each other in a group might also be of the same species.

Then Homer spoke. He said something in English, something like "Let be the finale of seem." And he continued with what was the rest of a Wallace Stevens poem. As he was about to recite the last verse, one of the others interrupted him by placing a finger on my son's lips, and I heard him say: The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream.

They didn't see me, or they didn't pay attention to me. I think I was about to collapse into the dead leaves. I felt lost, ignored, and as insignificant as any of those dry leaves I was crushing between my knees. I took off my torn shirt and looked at my body, trying to find my identity: a white, naked body, with so little hair that I looked more like a scrawny reptile trying to crawl through the winding forest floor.

I felt hands on my back, recognized Efigenia caressing me, and heard her crying, too, with me. But even though I couldn't see her, I know her lips held a smile that felt like an insult to me.

I was a man, a body and mind in decline. The remnants of ancient wisdom had been fading in my memory for a long time, even before my generation.

Homer had asked me a question some time ago. I should have answered him what I had now definitively discovered: there is no regression.

The other apes approached Homer, and I heard them talking and shaking hands in proper greetings; some hugged him, and two or three kissed him on the cheeks. My son surrendered himself to them, small and puny, but upright like the others. No longer afraid, he raised his head toward the tall trees, allowing himself to be led to another clearing in the undergrowth. I got up and followed them. Efigenia was clinging to my arm, looking at me affectionately, although I didn't meet her eyes because I was so ashamed of my ignorance that I wouldn't have been able to continue if that shame had been reflected in her. Fandiño followed us.

The jungle we were in suddenly turned into a prairie, or rather a savannah where the sun shone brightly upon the grass. The grass, sometimes tall, sometimes short, moving in the wind that refreshed my body. Efigenia hugged my waist, and together we walked across the savannah, following the group of apes toward a building that stood in a hollow in the road. Now I could look her in the eyes. She smiled at me, but every time I tried to, I felt a lump in my throat, and Efigenia placed her hand on my chest, rubbing me like a crying child.

We climbed the hill behind which the group of monkeys had disappeared. The grass was now completely yellow, tall, and dry. There were no trees nearby, except when we reached the top, and from there we saw that the roof we had glimpsed belonged to an old colonial-style house. We saw them come in through the front door, and we continued along the path that led there.

"What is that place?" I asked, but she told me it was her first time visiting.

"Fandiño must know," I said, but when I turned around, the old man was no longer in sight. We stepped back, holding our hands to our foreheads to shade ourselves. We saw him sitting on the ground, petting an animal that looked like a coyote. She called to him with a shout, then the animal looked at us, and I noticed its large eyes, the almost yellow, spotted color of its fur, and the characteristic slope of its back. The jackal ran away, and Fandiño began to walk slowly toward us.

Efigenia helped him as she had helped me. The old man was tired, and his legs ached. She pointed out the house, and he said it was one of Levi's laboratories. He slept there during the months he spent in Brazil. But now he wasn't in that house, but in another of his offices. He would undoubtedly see us the next day.

I felt increasingly confused; reality was becoming distorted: the house we were seeing was one of the many inside the institute building, on just one of its many floors. That was what my reason told me, but I couldn't reconcile it with the idea that we were in a vast meadow after crossing a kind of jungle that had taken us more than half an hour to traverse, in an open space under a clear sky and dazzling sun.

Perhaps all this was nothing more than the effect of prolonged sunstroke. Perhaps my son and I were in the middle of a road, asleep in the car on a hot afternoon. But these ideas seemed as artificial and uncertain to me, as the thought that Homer hadn't been born with an ape's hand seemed false and illusory.

The three of us climbed the short staircase that led to the arcade surrounding the mansion. We approached the door and knocked. We waited. The sound of the wind on the ancient roof seemed to be playing a low-pitched instrument. No one answered us. Then I placed my hand on the handle and opened it.

The room we entered had the standard furnishings of an old house: the reception area of an old mansion typical of a 17th or 18th-century coffee plantation, with a table in the center and mirrors on the walls, vases on high pedestals, and pots of tropical plants and flowers. A wide staircase with wooden railings led to the first-floor hallway where we could see closed room doors and drawn curtains with fringed ribbons and gold tassels. Fandiño went ahead of us and told us to follow him. Instead of going up, he passed by the foot of the stairs and headed to the back, where a high arch with wooden bas-reliefs led us to a series of smaller rooms, not arranged along a hallway, but one leading to the other, and there was no way to access each one without first passing through one of the previous ones. Then we entered the first room, where the music of a string quartet suddenly greeted us with an allegro apassionatto movement. Four apes were playing their instruments, sitting in their chairs, facing each other, absorbed in their practice, turning the pages of sheet music on the music stands. Efigenia and I stood there for a while, very close to the door, my naked, sweaty torso contrasting with the conversational atmosphere, as if we had suddenly entered a room from two centuries earlier. The musicians were dressed in contemporary fashion, some in jeans and T-shirts, the cello

player in short-sleeved shirts and twill pants. They were playing Schubert's Death and the Maiden quartet. They didn't look at us, and old Fandiño signaled us to continue. We followed him to the next room, where a group of three or four apes were talking. I noticed that they were arguing heatedly, with impetus and loud voices, interrupting each other. Suddenly, a laugh would relieve the tension, and they would take a drink from the bottles that were on the table around which the crowd had gathered. an arrimado. One seemed to be the leader, for, changing the subject, he began his speech, proposing a kind of hypothesis on the history of political institutions, and soon the others began to interrupt him, some nodding, others contradicting him. The old man led us to the next door, where a theater group was acting out a scene from the fourth act of Shakespeare's Hamlet. The ape actors were standing next to what must have been a tomb, and the main character was holding a human skull. He watched him closely, reciting in English what I remembered to be Prince Hamlet's recollection of Yorick's skull. I recognized perfect, old-fashioned English that I couldn't understand. For a moment, the ape stared at me, without rising from his kneeling position, and I felt a kind of ancient reproach, and the smile that spread across his face was reminiscent of the scents of dampness and dry leaves, as if we were both in a Danish forest on a winter night, and he were contemplating my own skull.

Efigenia noticed my restlessness, the perspiration on my trembling body, and said something to Fandiño. He ignored her and told us to follow him. In the next room, there was music again, but it came from a piano where someone was playing a dance rhythm. Several apes were dancing an intense, somewhat static dance; they embraced, separated, and came together again with gestures of their hands and arms. They couldn't dance like humans, not yet, and I discovered in the glances they gave us that resentment stemming from an unwavering envy. The music didn't stop, but the pauses were noticeable, transforming the music into a kind of dark hollow where the light coming from the windows sank like a black hole, and suddenly the same notes emerged again, transformed into the dissonant songs of birds hidden in very tall, leafy trees. And when we walked toward the other door, eager to escape, the piano keys were no longer piano keys, but leaves we stepped on the muddy, leaf-covered earth.

Fandiño gave us no respite, and although Efigenia seemed to pity me, she was so fascinated by everything she saw that she wasn't willing to stop. I thought of Homer, and taking the old man by the arm, I made him stop.

"Where is my son?" I asked.

"Patience, Professor. You'll see him soon enough."

He continued toward the next room. There were only two apes. One sat at a desk, the other sat opposite in a chair, listening to what the other was saying. It was a poem in Portuguese, perhaps one of the epic poems by Luis de Camôens, perhaps The Lusiadas. There was another chair by the door, and I sat down, regardless of what Efigenia or the old man might wish. I didn't move from there until the poem ended. For fifteen long minutes, I let myself be carried away by the sometimes terse, sometimes impenetrable

sound of ancient Portuguese. I immersed myself in the battles and felt the sound of body blows, the shouts and rumble of armies on land, the sound of the sea and waves on the ships arriving from the Old World to the Brazilian shores, the smell of gunpowder and the sound of musket fire. And my visions extended beyond what the poem referred to, contemplating future wars, the construction of cities, steamships, and trains across the Americas. Then, for a moment, I saw Homer in the middle of another war. He wasn't wearing a uniform or carrying weapons, but he was in the middle of it, naked like an ape in the middle of the Amazon, staring into nothingness behind his eyes, looking at everything he couldn't see around him.

I raised my head, which I had tried to hide in my hands, my elbows resting on my knees. The reciter had stopped and was looking at me. He began to approach me. When he was a step away, he extended a hand. I saw my son's ape-like hand again, small in my memory. The anguish returned, just as the despair returned. I wanted to cry because I couldn't bear my own body anymore.

"It's an honor to meet you, Professor. I've read your books. And we're proud that your son is joining us."

I looked at him, not knowing how to respond. The violent response that first came to mind flashed through my mind, because I didn't understand, because my mind was too burdened by my anguish to comprehend everything I had just seen in that house. I dried my face as best I could with the backs of my hands and realized once again that I was almost naked, and the hair on my body, although sparse, looked like that of an animal recently released from a long period of confinement. My long hair, the beard I hadn't shaved in several weeks, the ridiculous pants Efigenia had gotten me. I was a laughing thing to this being who was looking at me, the one who hadI had recited Camôens, clearly understanding each verse and each expression in the most accurate way, because it had shone through in his expression that he understood the true meaning of the spirit of an epic. I was a clown, a mascot disguised as a human, I was a circus animal. And I felt myself shrinking, I smelled the smell of my body, dirty and wounded by the sun and the branches and the grass, my tanned skin and my weak muscles. I looked at my hands, sore and bruised that they couldn't play any instrument, or even hold a pencil and write. I could barely utter a sound that I thought was a word.

"There is no regression," Homer had told me not long ago. There isn't, I thought, for them, but quietly there is for us. The circles of history are parallel spirals that can meet and intersect.

Where was Dr. Levi, to ask him all this?

As if Fandiño had read my thoughts, he said, like a priest of a cult:

"Dr. Levi isn't here, but he'll be with you soon."

It's often said, I thought, that God is nowhere to be seen, but everywhere. Perhaps he was among us now, perhaps he was that ape who had just recited and was now looking at me with an expression of respect despite

my dishonorable appearance. Because he was looking into my eyes, not my body, but the veiled form of my soul.

He placed a hand on my right shoulder. The thick hair on his hand reminded me of Homer's. He led me to the next room. Efigenia and Fandiño followed us. The smaller room was lit by a lamp on a desk, and I realized that several hours had passed since we entered, because it was getting dark. On the desk, there were also many books stacked up, and papers that seemed scattered but were being consulted one after the other by someone who had gotten up from his chair, now barely moved from the desk. On the other side, there was an ape, writing on other papers, and simultaneously consulting an electronic notebook. The light from the screen, which I couldn't see, illuminated his face only a little, enough to see him blink. His hair was lighter than the others', and he had dark green eyes, I thought. I don't know if he noticed us entering, but he didn't say anything when his companion returned to his chair, carrying a steaming cup. They exchanged something in low voices, without looking at each other, and then I recognized Homer in the newly arrived ape. They exchanged papers, and my son read something he had written a few minutes before. The other listened attentively, his gaze lowered, and nodded or shook his head. He made comments, sometimes smiling. I listened to some verses I knew from before, when Homer had shown me some poetry he had written since our stay in Montevideo. The other urged him to read something new, and my son seemed reluctant at first, then rubbed his eyes, as if exhausted, and tried to read what he had written. The other then handed him a pair of glasses, and Homer took them between his fingers and put them on. I saw him smile for the first time in a long time, and his face was different from the one I knew. He was my son, but suddenly he had grown. He was almost a man, but much more than that. It was a mind that codified its intellect according to the rhythms of ancient versification, so much so that at times I thought I heard quotes or words in Greek.

It was the first time I saw him wear glasses. The first time, also, that I knew for sure that a new world was being born in that building.

I was an infamous witness, an intruder in that world that had begun to collapse out there.

16

His name was Friedrich. Levi himself had brought him from that small German village on one of his trips. The doctor who delivered him tried to drown him as soon as he took him out of his mother's womb. He said that as soon as she saw him, she grimaced in horror, and then the doctor placed him on the operating table and put a sheet over his head. But she screamed, suddenly more horrified by the act than by the appearance of her son, and the doctor looked at her as if he didn't understand. Then a nurse took the sheet from her hands and took charge of caring for the child.

"That was the first time they tried to get rid of me," he said, as we walked toward one of the balconies on the upper floors. We'd been there for almost an hour, and there was still a long way to go. I'd never get used to the proportions of distances in that building, not even if several years passed. Space was a different dimension in that place, in keeping with and perhaps even more incongruous than the disproportionality of time inside suggested. But we were in a time in the world where nothing was certain, the future and its technology were allowing themselves to be overcome by the remnants of the past, which were no longer malodorous samples, but were gaining strength, reconquering spaces, Twisting logic.

A few weeks after his birth, when he was already at home, several fanatical women from the provincial parish came to take him away and burn him. This time it was his father who saved him. The men had gone to the factory where he worked, and he ran out and arrived home after the women had already taken him. He got back in the car and followed them. When he saw the group of women, he ran over the ones behind him, and then they screamed and insulted him, but they let go of the child. His father picked him up from the ground, like a small black rag covered in hair, put him in the car, and returned home. No authorities came to look for him or charged him with the attack by the women. No one in town dared to contradict his story.

"My parents moved many times, because I was the only one up until that point, you understand? At least the only one known in Europe." My father no longer had a job, and as I grew older, it was harder to hide me, and they didn't want to. They didn't want to turn me into an isolated being or a circus freak. Then one day Levi arrived, informed of the case, because news of my birth had already spread, and journalists and doctors were arriving who wanted to study me. I remember him looking at me with his young eyes—he was still practically a student—and speaking to my parents. And they, I don't know why, trusted him at that moment. Of course, I would later understand, but at that time I was five years old and already looked like an ape, but I walked upright and spoke perfectly. Was I a man? I wondered. He told me he was a hominid: man and ape. An ancestral stock from which both species derived. And why was he born that way? I asked him, already on the ship that brought us to America. Because the molecular structure of DNA is a spiral, and the natural history of the world is something very similar. “The cycles of history, dear Friedrich,” he told me, “you'll have the opportunity to see that later, if we're lucky.”

From then on, he was in Brazil. He witnessed the construction of the Institute building and welcomed each of the apes who later arrived. Only a couple of them died; the rest, who could be recognized in the world, were now there. There weren't many, but time, slow and evolving, would ensure that there would be more. I asked him if they expected to reproduce among themselves.

“Surely, Professor, it would be inevitable. But that doesn't guarantee that more like us will be born. I told you, chance and the contingency of genes will determine that. We'll only be able to have human children, perhaps,

just as it has been the other way around until now. The arrival of your son revives us, believe me.”

“Why?” I asked him as we reached the enormous balcony with the creeping plants that fell into the abyss like great staircases that one could climb or descend. Contemplating, however, the gray sky, the disorganized city, with cars and ambulances rushing from one place to another, with sirens blaring constantly, with the armed forces tanks guarding every corner, with the explosions that echoed every half hour, not to mention the gunshots and machine gun fire, who would have wanted to leave that place? The invasion of the indigenous people was growing stronger. They used nothing but spears and arrows, but their numbers did not decrease despite the mass killings. It was said that the emperor had sent expeditionary forces with orders for their complete extermination in the Amazon. Planes flew overhead, patrolling the jungle every day, bombing it regularly. The news on television and in the newspapers carried reports from journalists who had ventured into the jungle, and those who returned to recount their experiences did so from a hospital bed, with some limb amputated or extensive wounds after being flogged by the indigenous people. What did they intend with that invasion? I asked. Friedrich, with his persistent German accent, tried to answer me.

"Because Homer is different, extremely different. His intelligence is superior. What we do is no different from what humans have always done: art, science, history, poetry. But Homer is a superior hominid, what Levi had imagined since he first saw me. You know that evolution was different in the different branches of primitive beings; some evolved faster and in a certain way, others in another, and from there the human races. The apes still have their appearance, but they have also evolved. What has happened in recent times, or perhaps in thousands of years, since genetic changes are measured very slowly, is the same multiple and varied process: some branches have changed their DNA in a certain way, for example, simply changing their physical appearance, others the molecular structure of the immune system, others the genetics of the nervous system." Exciting. What Levi hoped for, and feared, was obtaining a specimen that combined the characteristics of a common trunk, or at least one that represented the larger branches. What he feared was that it would be a primitive and bestial being, and that the true involution would then begin with it, or, on the contrary, that larger branch would be like a U-turn on a highway: everything we have now, we bring back, but adding to the entire burden of knowledge and potential, the burden of stem cells. How can I explain it, Professor, if we can't even imagine it?

"And Homer is the closest thing to that, isn't he?"

He nodded, without looking at me, his eyes fixed on the drama unfolding before us. A squadron of planes was heading toward the Amazon. The explosions could be felt beneath our feet, and the smell of smoke reached hundreds of kilometers away. Despite all the armament, the imperial government seemed to be losing patience. The Indian hordes were returning, and no one knew what their objective was. They simply killed everyone in the city, whether white or black, even natives who had become

civilized after several generations. I remembered the day they attacked us on the train; they only wanted to take Homer, because if they had wanted to kill him, they would have. I told this to Friedrich.

"That doesn't surprise me; the only building they've spared so far is this one. I believe—and this is an idea I haven't shared with anyone, not even Levi—that they're coming to find us, not to kill us."

I knew that similar events were happening in the rest of South America, but only in Brazil did so many indigenous tribes persist, hidden deep within the Amazon. The international war collaborated with them, at least indirectly. The armed forces were forced to divide both at the borders and within the country. The war between Argentina and Brazil was supported by several neighboring countries, and the arms support from North America and Europe was known.

Friedrich remembered what his parents had told him about World War II, about the Jewish ghettos, for example.

"We're in a ghetto, don't you think, Professor? We, the apes, and you, a few 'humans' supporting us. A kind of large department in the Anne Frank style." And he laughed as he said it.

Friedrich was a literature professor. He knew several languages and could recite fragments of Shakespeare and Goethe in the original. His forced isolation had given him the opportunity to read and study much more than I could. His memory had developed prodigiously to retain quotations or entire texts. And the ability to associate developed thanks to that great memory. When we talked about literature, he would overwhelm me with hundreds of quotations, and I would have to stop him to give myself time to remember. He would apologize, embarrassed. I would look at him, thinking, trying to remember Leopoldo Lugones's story about a monkey. Yes, he had read it, he said, and his eyes shone at the memory.

He became my closest friend during my time at the institute. Homer was a student, and we barely had time to spend alone for a few hours. I slept on the upper floor of the mansion, along with some of the other ape relatives. We barely spoke to each other, and they regarded me as an intruder, suspicious. I wasn't really interested in interacting with them. My circle was limited to my son, Friedrich, and Efigenia. She had become an intense but accommodating lover. I had never had sex in such a strangely appealing way. The pleasure wasn't different in terms of the lovemaking, but in the intensity, in the foreplay that already enraptured me from the start, to the point of repeated orgasms and multiple ejaculations. It exhausted me, but the next day I felt renewed. I would leave my room smelling of semen and vaginal secretions, take a shower, and then go out onto the mansion's balcony, smelling the scent of the nearby jungle. She stayed in bed all day on Sundays, but the rest of the week she got up before me to go to work in the city. Back then, she was a messenger from abroad, and when she returned at the end of the workday, she would tell me the latest news: fires in the commercial district, massacred men covered in arrows, like a painting of Saint Sebastian. She would tell me this in bed,

sitting with her feet on the mattress and her hands on her knees, staring blankly at the wall across from her bed.

"My ancestors are doing it," she told me. "I'm a mulatto, with a black father and an Indian mother. I should be angry with everyone, and with myself. Because now I'm in love with a white man whiter than milk." She smiled bitterly as she said it, and began to caress my face, my chest, my entire body with her hands, with long fingers like ebony branches. that scraped me, leaving jungle scars.

Her confidant, however, continued to be old Fandiño. There was a complicity between them from which I was always excluded. Efigenia continued to work in the city, but spent more and more time in the building. She met with the old man in the afternoons, for work reasons, she told me. There were many cases of children with congenital malformations living on the streets; I had seen them myself, dragging their stumps along the sidewalks, sometimes among the corpses of recently dead Indians. Some of them were missing both legs and got around on skateboards with broken wheels that got caught on the sidewalk tiles. I wondered how much space there was in the building to accommodate so many of them, because one night she told me that the apes were becoming more and more frequent. "There are many born in Europe and Asia, but because of the war, it's impossible to convince the parents to bring them, even if Levi asked."

"And when will we see Dr. Levi?" I asked, because I still had many questions that needed answering.

She shrugged.

"We'll have to ask Fandiño."

The next day, I waited in the waiting room of the top-floor offices all morning. When the old man appeared, opening one of the transparent doors, he looked at me in surprise, as if he didn't know I was there.

"Professor, why didn't you tell me you were waiting?"

"I told your secretary's assistant, Fandiño, almost four hours ago. I want to know when Dr. Levi will see us."

The old man cleared his throat and invited me to sit down. He looked up through the glass roof, pointing at an airplane.

"There goes the doctor, headed for the United States." His trip to the moon will soon take place. He would have liked to meet his son, the professor, but the doctor is an extremely busy man, and you'll understand that this project of space travel has had him very nervous lately.

I remembered what Friedrich had told me about a certain kind of fear or anxiety that might exist in Levi regarding the true importance of Homer, that theory of the main trunk of our ancestors. Perhaps, and I say only perhaps, he hadn't wanted to meet him, because if what he suspected was true, he probably wouldn't know what to do with my son, he who undoubtedly knew more than anyone in the world about the new apes. And if it wasn't true, he wouldn't have wanted to face the disappointment.

That's why he was a kind of God to us. Someone who knew everything, who was even the creator of the theories that explained the existence of Homer and the others. Someone who lived and worked at the top of his building in Brasilia, like a central office from which he pulled the strings of his contacts around the world. Publications, conferences, consulting services in multiple states and private companies, personnel trained by himself who were conducting explorations and research in various countries at the same time. And now we saw him in the sky, flying to another part of the world, and this time soon to head off into outer space. Yes, Dr. Levi was a God, and consistent with the human idea of God, omnipresent and always silent, and powerless to anything but theory and abstraction. Who knows if God created man, as they say, or simply created the idea that explains him? Man, an idea created by another idea: God. The vicious circle, the circle with the snake that bites itself.

Ricardo Molinari's poem came to my lips, and Fandiño listened attentively. I don't know if he fully understood me, but he seemed to appreciate the fatalistic tone.

"A science fiction poem, if I may say so, Professor."

I looked at him with admiration.

"Yes," I replied, "and its author was a man of the past."

"They're usually the ones who perceive the future best."

He stood up and placed a hand on my shoulder. He invited me to lunch in the city.

"But do you think it's a good idea? Because of the attacks, I mean."

"Professor, never mind that. We have to get out of this place from time to time, not lose touch with reality—the other one, I mean. The world, my dear friend, has different levels, like layers of an onion, which on countless occasions are unknown to each other."

We went down to the first floor of the mansion. Homer was with his rhetoric teacher, and we interrupted them to invite them to lunch. My son turned to look at me and took off his glasses. He frowned, and his vision took a while to focus on me. For a moment, I had the impulse to blame the teacher for subjecting him to so much reading, but I realized that I, too, had been doing the same thing for many years.

The ape who was teaching Homer was still young, not much younger than my age. He was somewhat obese, covered with sparse, lank hair that barely covered his dark, parchment-like skin. He suffered from fungal infections in his variouss creases of their arms and legs, and barely combated the smell with sprays and creams. One got used to it, of course, to the point that, like Homer, one no longer felt there was even a scent to pay attention to.

"I excuse myself, gentlemen, I have other students this afternoon. Thank you for the invitation."

Then Fandiño, Homer, and I left the building. I hadn't been out for a few weeks, and I had only seen the outside from the height of the balconies. But now I was back on the street, seeing the city and its inhabitants at their same height. A kind of helplessness overwhelmed me, as if I had suddenly lost my ability to survive. The institute building protected us all, because that's precisely what it had been built for, to shelter those who were rejected. Inside, they developed their intellect, their skills, and their personalities, but it didn't prepare them to survive in the outside world. Where there was war and invasion, where there was hunger.

The three of us walked on that quiet Monday afternoon, despite the anxiety and anticipation of an imminent invasion. There was a truckload of soldiers on almost every corner, and people walked along the sidewalks, staring at each other, distrusting one another. Homero had grown taller and was almost my height. People looked at him with fearful respect and moved away from him. The gendarmes asked us for identification, but some recognized old Fandiño and then let us pass without hesitation.

We walked several blocks through the new neighborhood, a cluster of shanties that contrasted with Niemeyer's designs. Fandiño led us to a bar on a corner, very similar to the one we had visited in São Paulo with Gonçalvez. We sat by a window, and for a moment I thought I was in Buenos Aires, because the street was cobblestone, and the neighborhood had warehouses and doors to sheds or closed garages. I looked at the sign in the window and saw the name of the bar: "La Carambola." A brief but eloquent laugh prompted the old man's comment.

"I'm glad you feel at home for a little while..." He made a gesture with his hand as if holding something invisible between his thumb and index finger. The "little" had come out slightly "aporte" (Porteño), and to top off the incongruity, he called the waiter and ordered a cortado with the typical gesture.

I laughed again, but it was all nothing more than a fallacy. Portuguese was reborn in my ears, and the black pedestrians passing by on the sidewalk revealed that the Buenos Aires of my time was not the one I inhabited now. I thought about alternative times, about the famous theories of some unconventional historians about what the present would be like if some events had occurred differently. Perhaps this time in which I lived was nothing more than a parallel time, but I told myself that this imaginary consolation, by which fate ceased to exist, was inconsistent with reason. I thought of Kant, and his influence on the outlook Homer had developed throughout his childhood. I watched him read the menu, torn at the edges, dog-eared. He was paying as much attention as if he were reading Aristotle's Politics.

I knew he had begun to write something new, some kind of long poem, but I didn't have a chance to ask him. His studies with the new teacher took up most of his day. Sometimes, on weekends, we went for walks in the meadow surrounding the mansion, and then we were preoccupied with listening to the silence more than talking. We watched each other, I trying to understand him, because my son had grown up and his appearance was

now completely ape-like. I would hardly have been able to recognize him among the others if I hadn't seen him for a few months. He, I think, also looked at me suspiciously. I know he remembered what had happened in Sao Paulo, although I don't know if that was all he could hold against me. I looked into his eyes and saw myself asking myself questions: Was it right to leave Buenos Aires? Could we have stayed in Montevideo? Why did we run away? Our whole life together had been an escape, and even this very building was a refuge, a glass zoo, which, like a Tennessee Williams character, would drive us mad.

Those at the nearby tables looked at us suspiciously. They talked among themselves, and I think they heard our Spanish, and whispered something that Fandiño translated as an intention to call the gendarmes. Then he turned around, called the waiter, who had already looked fearfully at Homer, and the old man spoke in his ear. Then the man went from table to table, saying something to each of us. Then the curious glances disappeared. We wouldn't have been able to leave without Fandiño; our true home was forever in the inverted pyramid building.

I didn't know what Homer's writing was about, and I was going to ask him when a truck of soldiers passed by with the alarm siren. A new attack ofThe Indian attack had begun, and it was advancing through the streets. Everyone got up and approached the windows, but the owner began to lower the metal shutters. We had to stay inside until the danger passed. We sat back down, and the others began to talk about the war with Argentina, and they looked at us, speaking loudly in Portuguese, mixing in insults in Spanish. Homero was harassed by the stares, because he knew they were also accusing him of being the cause of the internal revolution. The country was unhinged by international politics, which was using the Indigenous people as weapons that were eating away at Brazil from within. One of them approached our table and threw the morning paper at us. New changes in the Argentine government, it said. The de facto president had died, and his wife, Samanta Bernárdez, had assumed the presidency. In her speech, she had emphasized the need to defend against an empire that wanted to dominate Latin America. Homero looked me in the eye, but he was no longer the boy who had left Buenos Aires, saddened by his mother's rejection. Now he was perhaps the cause of an extermination, as if his mother had been chasing him all those years along the roads and through the cities until she found him. But to do so, he hadn't needed to leave the country; he had only to rise in power, like someone ascending an ever-higher watchtower, acquiring greater power and greater reach of vision. But I insisted on convincing myself that the international war and the indigenous revolution had nothing to do with my son. How could I make him understand, he who now had fear in his eyes? And I was beginning to worry as I noticed that fear was turning into suspicion, and that from there to anger and hatred the path would be swift and downward. If his intelligence were drowning in dark feelings..., I asked myself. Then I grabbed his hand, and suddenly two bombs, following one another in mere seconds, ripped through the curtains, and we were left defenseless against the streets littered with the corpses of the gendarmes. The tanks had exploded, and it wasn't indigenous people attacking us, but warplanes.

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As the gunpowder smoke and debris dissipated, the screams of the people continued to be heard, some distant, amid the squeal of brakes in the streets and the sirens of fire engines and police, others very close. But these last ones weren't really screams, but moans of pain, and I imagined the injuries of those men and women who had occupied the nearby tables, and now, even though I couldn't see them, would be on the floor, wounded by shell shrapnel or crushed by fragments of walls.

I had my son pinned to the floor, my right hand on his back, forcing him not to get up. I felt their restless movements, their curiosity, their suppressed tears. The dust took a long time to settle, but I didn't want to get up until I was sure no other piece of wall or ceiling would fall on us if we moved. And when the smoke and dust slowly dissipated, the figures of the soldiers appeared on the street, without looking toward the destroyed bar, running, machine-gunning I don't know what or whom. The screams continued, scattered, mostly from women and a few men complaining of their wounds. I heard the planes continuing to pass over the city. Some bombs fell far away from us, but I felt the explosion in my head, resting against the bar's tiles.

I raised my head and saw, still at ground level, the shattered tables that were no longer tables, but splintered pieces of wood. Two men had glass embedded in their legs, and a woman, already dead, lay on her back with a chair leg penetrating her face. The ceiling hadn't collapsed, but the plasterwork had fallen in large pieces on several other men trying to free themselves. I looked toward where the door had been. The metal shutters had been twisted like cardboard; several pieces of metal had even been torn off and scattered throughout the interior. I looked to my left and saw Fandiño's body with a long, narrow metal fragment embedded in his back. We had to get out of there. How could we expect a rescue if the entire city was being bombed by the enemy? Argentines, yes, but also the few allied countries, and the relentless support of the Americans. The Fourth World War had begun, and there was no longer room for the idea of humanity. Only cities, only governments, companies as states. We, men, were no longer such, but working apes, laborers, prescriptive elements.

Then I turned my head toward Homer. He was looking at me, and crying. I wanted to comfort him, but how, I wondered. To stroke his head, to dry his tears on the hair on his face, which was already drying on its own. He didn't need my words of comfort or mypitying glances, not even the acknowledgment of my intense fear, my desperation. The only thing I could give him was my company, so I told him to get up, slowly. We went out onto the sidewalk, jumping over the rubble and some corpses. A hand grabbed my heel, and the voice of the wounded man called for help. It wasn't the hand of an ape, but of a human, white and pale, bare of all hair. Even my own hand looked more like my son's than that man's. And I knew his time had passed. I looked at him with weariness and contempt. I didn't even

think about his soul, because in an uncertain way I felt that the human spirit, that collective entity that gathered the scattered individual fragments that inhabited certain bodies, was now leaving its habitat and moving toward the new forms of the species.

We walked slowly, cautiously, still somewhat dizzy, still somewhat deaf from the roar of the bombs so close. Pressed against the walls, checking that no pieces of eaves or bricks would fall on our heads. Tanks rolled through the streets, and police cars raced from one place to another. We passed men and women who looked at us with extreme fear. Some told us to go to a shelter, but as soon as they saw Homer, they ran away. My son and I walked hand in hand, he almost as tall as me, like two brothers or two men linked by tragedy. I thought about our long pilgrimage from Buenos Aires, because that's what it had been, a kind of pilgrimage based on a profane faith, I don't know if in science or in search of some unknown cause. But when we reached the great cathedral-institute, the great inverted pyramid of Niemeyer's disciple, the god Levi had escaped us, himself seeking other places where his own god perhaps lay.

The only truth I knew for sure at that moment was that I didn't know where to go. We walked and ran through streets and avenues. The entire city was a parade of various forms of chaos, in all its different expressions, including those I would never have imagined. That proverbial indifference in which my generation had been raised, the veil of apparent pacifism, was nothing more than the cruel idiocy we had been taught. Only in certain circles, perhaps in certain families, like Samanta's, was the truth known. I lived in a Buenos Aires that revolved around bohemian atmospheres, like a kind of fin de siecle brought to the 21st century. I could give myself the excuse that we were a privileged generation: economic resources and social indifference. A perfect conjunction for the development of the expansion of the intellect. Ideas, debates, conferences, cultural events, until from so much repetition we fell into a void, nothingness as essential thought. That's why, as I said at the beginning of this chronicle—if that's what I can call this account of the most important part of my life, these notes I took sporadically—we didn't see how our society slowly and imperceptibly collapsed. A driver driving calmly down a street suddenly sees, on the steering wheel, an ape's hand. His own, no doubt, but he only saw it for a few seconds, and then he'd never see it again. Strange things kept happening, murmurs, insults whispered behind our backs, as if our ears had become more attuned, just like our eyesight. Until we saw and heard things we never thought possible, simply because our minds couldn't conceive of them that way.

God is there when we think of him; that idea is his presence. That alone is consolation.

Planes passed constantly over Brasilia. The sky was covered with a haze of smoke rising from the burning buildings and neighborhoods. A constant siren blared on every block, increasing or decreasing as we approached or receded. People pushed us from behind and in front of us. There was no way for the firefighters to stop the blaze or the police to prevent the massacre that was already taking place: the looting, the robbery of corpses,

the murders perpetrated in the confused mass of shouting and pushing. And then I decided to run faster in search of shelter, and I found ourselves heading toward the Institute building. That place seemed impregnable, a kind of fortress for the preservation of humanity. A bastion, a new kind of Paradise.

My son's ape-like hand gave me confidence; perhaps it was actually guiding me. That hand that was the first to emerge from his body, the ancestral, the original. I listened, as we ran through the rubble, with the sound of the turbo engines above us, overwhelming us, to a strong, smooth voice, singing, or I don't know if singing, but reciting. I turned around for a moment and saw that it was Homer speaking. I was practically dragging him, and he had trouble keeping up, but he didn't stop reciting. I read Milton's verses: Paradise Lost. I saw, in that city, the armies of Lucifer, Lucifer himself declaiming before the angels. And Homer's voice was enough to rescue them from oblivion.

Then, as the only prelude to the final calamity, I felt a noise so intense, as if an airplane were falling a few meters away, deafening me. Then everything was darkness for a long, long time. A vague period in which I dreamed that thousands of airplanes covered the sky. A metal sky covered us, a kind of enormous dome protecting the city. And then those airplanes began to move their wings, and they became enormous, immense prehistoric birds that arrived, threatening, apocalyptic.

I woke up lying face up, with my arms resting on two large fallen walls. All was the silence of the deafness caused by the continuous explosions, which continued to fall because I could hear their rumble through the ground. I searched for my son among the rubble that had piled up on top of what had already fallen. I found him under some wooden doors. He called to me in a firm voice, "Daddy!" I heard him say, dragging myself toward him through the dust and blood of other men whose bodies I was violently pushing aside. I pulled the boards off and saw that his entire face was stained with blood.

"Calm down, son, calm down," I told him, because he was moaning with fear and shivering from the cold. The heat of the combustion was unbearable, but the sweat in his thick hair was cold.

With my shirt, I tried to wipe the blood from his face, and he began to scream louder. I didn't know what I was doing wrong, and I didn't want to hurt him. Then I stuck several shards of glass in my fingers. I searched through his hair and managed to pull out several pieces, but when I told him to take his hands away from his eyes, I saw that his eyelids were cut and his eyes were bleeding. Homer struggled with my hands; he wouldn't uncover himself, and the bleeding wouldn't stop. With the same cloth, I bandaged his eyes and tied a knot behind his head.

My hands trembled, but I tried to hug him, and he pressed himself against my body like when he was a little boy, in our apartment in Buenos Aires, on the living room couch. I sang him, as I had back then, a lullaby, poorly sung, without rhythm, and precisely for that reason more endearing, more full of memories because laughter had been added to the tenderness. And

that song was the one I sang to him in the midst of the bombing, cradling him as best I could, surrounded by pieces of buildings, wood, glass, and mutilated bodies. The almost unbreathable air became reminiscent of the warmth next to a heater in winter, and the shrill sound of sirens and alarms in the whirring of cars passing by the street next to the building where we had lived.

But all that had to end. So we got up and continued walking. I knew my steps were heading toward the institute, but what else was left to do? No hospital should be left standing, I imagined, and besides, how would I know where to go or which streets to take? They were all the same now, demolished houses and collapsed buildings. There was nowhere to go. And after almost an hour of walking, jumping over rubble, we reached a wide open space, and I recognized the remains of the large plaza that had been in front of the institute.

Yes, the building was still there. Undamaged.

"We're here!"

I picked him up because he was too tired to continue. The bandage was stained with blood, and he insisted on stretching his arms, feeling lost.

"How am I going to write now, Dad?"

"My God," I murmured. In the middle of all this, and he was worried about it. I smiled as a shiver ran through me at the sound of it. I took his head in my hands and pressed him against my chest, as if I wanted to stop the bleeding that way. Or as if I wanted to make him mine, for me to be him. I had never been prouder, my love had never been greater than in that moment.

"Write what?" I asked him.

He began to recite the verses of a long poem he had begun to practice with his teacher. Verses that spoke of a war. His voice was unscathed, and the words prophetic. And as he recited, the hungry and desperate dogs rushed into the square and began to rummage through the rubble in search of corpses, and a smell of decay, until then hidden, rose from the depths of the ruins and took over the air, until the air was nothing more than a dense gas made of carrion.

But the building still remained, that kind of Paradise from which we had left of our own free will, believing that we still lacked knowledge of external reality. What futility of human nature, what imbecility! I should say. I stood gazing at it, tall and majestic, with its columns no longer transparent from the dust and smoke surrounding them, and the hanging gardens with broken and rotten plants. Falls. But all that didn't matter; we'd keep walking there, or I'd carry Homer in my arms if necessary.

"Come on," I whispered in his ear. "They'll heal you there, and you'll write."

He grabbed my hand, squeezing it so tightly I thought he'd break it. His love, suddenly, was no longer thoughtful, no longer had that patina of

reason and prudence. His love was no longer logical. Now it was bestial, domineering, irreversibly passionate.

After a long time of not feeling any, a plane emerged from the clouds of smoke rising from the buildings throughout the city. It passed swiftly over our heads, spreading the acrid smell of bodies burned by the heat given off by the turbines. It was a plane going down, one of the Brazilian forces, shot down by one of the others. It fell, forming a trail of heat that distorted the air, deforming it like a mirage. On the long path to its death, it demolished houses and set fires, until I saw it heading toward the columns of the inverted pyramid.

I winced in anticipation of pain, and I felt that Homer, though blind, realized what was going to happen. Because he pressed himself against my body, and his embrace was so strong that he could have killed me at the very moment the plane crashed into the building, and the explosion caused a sequence of collapses of the countless columns.

The great pyramid slowly tilted, progressively to one side, and the roar of the collapse was such that the world would stop, sinking into its own abyss. Immense clouds of dust were born from the fall, moving in all directions, growing and rising, until they also covered us. I think I heard screams, although it seems implausible, I heard the screams of the men and apes who inhabited it. In the midst of the great white blindness we were in, Homer turned away from me. I saw him groping his way toward the collapse, heading toward that lost and never-recovered paradise.